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“different sentiments & different connections supports them:”

Sensibility, Community, and Diversity in British Women’s

Romantic-Period Poetry

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DECLARATION

This dissertation is my own work and has not been submitted for a degree at another university.

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| MY 716 | Hannah More to Marianne Thornton, 21 February, 1815. |
| RB 137748 | Felicia Hemans to Thomas Cadell, 5 July, n.d. |

ABSTRACT

With diversity as an overarching theme, women writers' responses to the cultural feminisation and developing social climate of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Britain are explored through analyses of their poems on sensibility, community, and abolition. To determine a focus for expressive criticism and recover Romantic women writers from the social and historical contexts that have previously succeeded in highlighting male literary achievements, women's poetry is considered a distinct contribution to Romanticism. This dissertation analyses poems written by Joanna Baillie, Anna Barbauld, Harriet and Maria Falconar, Frances Greensted, Frances Greville, Elizabeth Hands, Eliza Knipe, Isabella Lickbarrow, Hannah More, Amelia Opie, Priscilla Pointon, Mary Robinson, Mary Scott, Helen Maria Williams, Ann Yearsley, and Mary Julia Young.

Although literature brought together the public and private spheres, sensibility mediated between the two and served as a social currency for women. The various applications of sensibility are apparent in its dual-gendered nature, its link with reason, and the significance of economic language. A new genre of the "Address to Sensibility" was prominent in the period and followed a loose formula which defined sensibility, traced its personal impact, and determined a link between the Romantic culture and heightened emotion.

Through explorations of poems on intellectual coteries, patronage, creative influence, Reviews, and literary critique, it is evident that women poets' affiliations with the literary community were marked by a discomfort based on their literary associations, the anxiety about their public reception, and the social differences in the literary community. However, the development of social, intellectual, literary, and critical communities alleviated this discomfort and contributed to women's participation in literary culture.

In addition, women poets expressed sensibility and used images of community in diverse ways in their works against slavery and the trade. Abolitionist poetry acts as a case study of the particular motifs, highlighted throughout, such as the amalgamation of masculine and feminine, the political and economic applications of sensibility, the association of feeling with reason and community, and the assertion of individuality amidst commonality. Women poets' petitions to alleviate the sufferings of slaves paralleled arguments for the improvement of British society to benefit women. The poems discussed signify the complexity of the issues of sensibility, community, and diversity.

INTRODUCTION

In its praise of women's intellectual and artistic accomplishments, Mary Scott's engaging work "The Female Advocate; A Poem. Occasioned by Reading Mr. Duncombe's *Feminead*" (1774) lays claim to women's right to education and knowledge.¹ Part of its project is as a crucial canon-building poem as it introduces a history of female intellectuals, artists, and writers as a distinct group at the forefront of cultural change. This dissertation begins with Scott's poem because its canon-building vision resembles this study's broader aims to assert the significance of Romantic women's poetry as a response to the changing cultural climate, and to place the poems of some less prominent women writers among those more familiar to scholars today. Indeed, by recovering these lesser-known poems and analysing them in addition to more recognisable works, this dissertation, like Scott's "Female Advocate," shows that the literary culture was suffused with diversity. Furthermore, several of the more particular subjects of this dissertation—the sexual division of society, the ideological mixing of masculine and feminine, the use of feeling to build

¹ Mary Scott, "The Female Advocate; A Poem. Occasioned by Reading Mr. Duncombe's *Feminead*" (London: Joseph Johnson, 1774).

community, and the decisive call for social change—are found within Scott’s poem. A brief examination of this work introduces these prominent topics and occasions further inquiry into both the cultural politics of late-eighteenth-century Britain and the development of women’s poetry in the Romantic period.

Scott, a Unitarian who was in poor health for most of her life (1751–1793)², prefaces her poem with a letter, not only stating her intent and purpose, but simultaneously creating a connection between literary women. She informs the reader that with regard to the accomplished female writers of her time, she herself “took up the pen with an intention of becoming their advocate”(v), as the poem’s title suggests. Scott poses a series of questions which, she believes, must be satisfactorily answered on behalf of learned women. Among those questions, she asks the following: “If they have allowed us to study the imitative arts, have they not prohibited us from cultivating an acquaintance with the sciences?”(vi). Undoubtedly, “they” refers to the men and “us” refers to the women within Scott’s contemporary society. The sexual division of society is evident in the educational opportunities denied women, yet in turn gives them a sense of commonality. Although Scott wants the eradication of gender divisions, she still groups women together because of their sex. Moreover, the tone of the word “prohibited” is disapproving since it signifies that an authoritative body has drafted rules that may benefit some, yet hinder others. According to Scott, women have been subjected to rules to which they do not wish to conform. As she sees it, prohibiting women from learning denies them an opportunity that should be available to everyone.

Although she agrees that some educational progress has been made, Scott still feels “indignation”(vi) at the slow pace at which women have participated in

² Duncan Wu, ed. “Mary Scott” in *Romantic Women Poets: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1997), 131–32.

intellectual life. Therefore, if Scott can improve women's educational opportunities, then she can advance the culture, as well. In the introduction, she highlights men's "narrow prejudices in regard to the abilities of our sex"(vii) as one of the factors constraining women in society. Scott's use of the term "our sex" not only serves to reinforce the notion that women feel they belong to a larger collective of females, but also augments her advocacy of the rights of women in a biased, androcentric, even segregated, nation.

In her argument to free women from the societal bias against their right to education and knowledge, Scott praises the accomplishments of women more than she refers to the impediments to female authorship. By beginning with "ages past" to build up the history of intellectual women, she supports her argument and reinforces the developing literary canon:

In ages past, when learning's feeble ray
First shone prophetic of a brighter day,
The female bosom caught the sacred flame,
And on her eagle-pinion soar'd to fame.
Emerging from the gloom of mental night,
Illustrious PARR first rose divinely bright,

(27-32)

The female writer feels inspiration in the form of a "sacred flame," a desire to write that comes from deep within her "bosom." The bosom, "considered as the seat of thoughts and feelings,"³ connotes a sense of nurturing of this inspiration within it. The female writer rises from the "gloom of mental night," an image Scott uses to symbolise the repressive shadow cast between women and higher learning. The last wife of Henry VIII, Catherine Parr (1512-48), described by Scott in a footnote as "a woman of great sense, singular prudence, and a most strenuous friend to the

³ The *Oxford English Dictionary* locates "bosom" as having this particular resonance in the eighteenth century. 2nd ed., 1989, s.v. "bosom."

reformation”(p.3), begins Scott’s catalogue of powerful women. Religious words such as “prophetic,” “sacred,” and “divinely” describe Parr’s intellectual ascendance as if an act of God enabled Parr to be a part of the learned, literary world. In the process, Scott emphasises the solemn reality that formal learning was long denied to most women. Yet the religious language used to describe Parr also elevates the female intellectual’s importance and worth. Moreover, in this passage, Scott aligns inspiration—albeit tinged by religious intervention—with learning.

Scott also describes Anne Killigrew (1660–85) in a similar, highly-esteemed manner. Killigrew was a poet and an artist, and although she excelled in both disciplines, she was known for her painting skills. She is an example of a well-rounded and intelligent woman, an “all-accomplish’d maid”(95). The reader learns in the poem that Killigrew’s “favor’d name / In DRYDEN’s verse shall boast immortal fame”(97–98). By putting his praise of this female author in writing, Dryden immortalises Killigrew as an accomplished, learned woman of the arts. Scott’s message is clear and her argument is substantiated: women can learn more than one discipline and learn them well enough to be publicly praised by their male counterparts.

Scott continues her argument of women’s accomplishments with Lady Rachel Russell (1636–1723) who epitomises the merging of masculine and feminine. Russell, born into high society, had within her “the strongest fortitude combin’d / With all the graces of a female mind”(113–14). She appears androgynous when Scott implies that Russell is able to combine strong, “masculine” courage with her “feminine” thoughts. Consequently, Russell’s writings have the power to “Rouze the lethargic, animate the weak”(129). Crucially, Scott expresses her belief that women’s writings merge masculine and feminine, thereby promoting their diversity and

allowing them to share the public and literary world with men. Apparently, Scott believes that women who possess the power to merge masculine and feminine traits can write works that are powerful enough to energise those trapped in an era when learning is often denied or inaccessible. Furthermore, Scott calls for “The sordid ties of sense and time to break”(130). Scott hopes these writings will finally be able to end the outdated societal beliefs which segregate women and knowledge.

Indeed, the boundaries between gender and learning are also challenged by Constantia Grierson (1706–33). Grierson, described as a woman who, although “her fortune low, her birth obscure, / Sprung from a race illiterate, rude and poor”(167–68), is used by Scott to exemplify the ability of any woman to acquire knowledge. While this comment is meant as a description of Grierson’s Irish heritage, Scott features it as proof that even women from “disadvantaged” backgrounds can succeed as writers. In a footnote, Scott dismisses the possibility of doubting Grierson’s intelligence thus: “Her wit was not tinctured with ill-nature, nor her learning sullied with pride: nor did her attainments in literature, render her neglectful of the humbler duties of domestic life”(p.16). The undesired traits of “pride” and “ill-nature” have not corrupted the goodness within her work, and Grierson’s abilities to carry out her domestic duties have assuredly remained intact. As an author, Grierson successfully supplements her domestic life with religious poetry. Furthermore, Scott’s inclusion of Grierson, whom she saw as a disparaged woman, indicates that her model of literary culture was receptive to gender and cultural diversity. However, Scott clearly shows her concern that women continue to balance their public literary lives and their private domestic lives.

“The Female Advocate” progresses through years of female literary accomplishments and eventually arrives at the eighteenth century with Anna Letitia

Barbauld (1743–1825). Scott believes Barbauld’s “harmonious”(421) writings truly communicate with the reader: “We feel thy feelings, glow with all thy fires, / Adopt thy thoughts, and pant with thy desires”(427–28). In her attempts to fortify and extend the literary canon, Scott argues that Barbauld possesses all of the abilities of her predecessors: she can communicate her feelings to others with an ability reminiscent of Russell; she possesses the inspirational forces of Parr; and her thoughts, like Grierson’s, influence others. Since Scott believes that Barbauld’s writings communicate emotions publicly, she uses the example of Barbauld to inform the reader that women are not just private, domestic beings. Rather, in Scott’s view, women can convey their emotions and display their feelings in their writings, thereby affecting the reader’s sensibility. In this way, women draw on their natural abilities to feel, nurture, connect, and inspire in order to create powerful literary works.

In summary, Scott transgresses traditional models of gender through her constructed grouping of intellectual women and her attempts to rally for women’s educational opportunities. In the opening of her poem Scott writes,

But say what theme shall sportive Fancy chuse,
Since nature’s charms no more delight the Muse?
What theme! and can it then a doubt remain
What theme demands the tributary strain,
Whilst LORDLY MAN asserts his right divine,
Alone to bow at wisdom’s sacred shrine;
With tyrant sway would keep the female mind
In error’s cheerless dark abyss confin’d?
Tell what bright daughters BRITAIN once could boast,
What daughters now adorn HER happy coast.

(17–26)

Throughout the poem, various accomplished women are used as evidence of the success of making educational opportunities accessible to women. Scott confidently mixes the traditionally “masculine” with the traditionally “feminine.” For example, female intellectuals write in the public sphere, yet still uphold domestic responsibility

and recognise the value of emotion. In addition, she acknowledges the diversity of the literary culture in order to give more weight to her claims for women's involvement.

Scott's efforts to develop the history of intellectual women places women writers of the past as mentors and peers of the women who succeeded them. Remarkably, the scope of Scott's historical and canonical vision spans over a century. Scott's awareness of an existing and growing tradition of women's literature anticipates a community of women writers who would advance in the late-eighteenth century not only as a prominent component of the literary culture, but also as an influential group in British society. Still, Scott's poem does serve as merely a beginning point to women's poetic contributions to Romanticism which would develop over the decades spanning the end of the eighteenth century and the start of the nineteenth. This prolific period of literary achievement signified growth and empowerment. When Scott concludes her poem, "But O would Heav'n my faded health renew / Unwearied I'd the glorious toils pursue"(519–20), she passes on the proverbial torch to her literary successors. Indeed, the issues delineated within Scott's poem are advanced during the years of Romanticism by the women poets who would boldly follow her.

1

ROMANTIC-PERIOD BRITAIN: THE FEMINISATION OF CULTURE

During the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, Britain was a country in flux. Cultural change was fuelled by war, social reform, gender issues, political debate, and religious contention. Women were caught amidst these developments while negotiating their own private and public subjectivities. Although each woman presented within this investigation contended in varying ways with the shifts in her culture and life during the turbulent decades of the Romantic period, all were conscious of the social pressures of the day.

Law, religion, medicine, and popular belief claimed to provide Britons with continuing “proof” that men were stronger, more intelligent, and more suitable for managing public duties and economic concerns. Still, these societal convictions would soon be challenged by an acceptance of more “feminine” interests within public life, and a new-found regard and esteem for the domestic and private. As Gary Kelly claims, “‘woman’ was a central figure in the rhetoric of the cultural revolution—so important that the cultural revolution could be seen as a feminization of culture, advancing the claims and position of women, permitting women to

participate in the cultural revolution, and even taking the form of feminist movements.”¹

The acceptance of more “feminine” values and characteristics would ultimately enforce an increased feminisation of British culture. As the “feminine” gained social approval, women became more crucial figures in British society. Yet it was not inevitable that women would adopt more public positions even though the processes of cultural feminisation created the possibility of more prominent and empowered roles for women within society. The most significant means by which women used this feminisation—or the increasing acceptance of women’s presence in the public sphere—to their advantage was through literature.

Literature linked the public with the private sphere and further feminised the culture. As Kelly argues, although reading and writing are most often carried out in private, these acts signify social communication with the wider literate culture.² Additionally, as I will demonstrate below, women’s literary discussions of their world argued for a further feminisation of the culture, just as Mary Scott’s “Female Advocate” challenged the sexual divisions in education by demonstrating that women can be productive, artistic, and intellectual members of society.

Women’s forays into literary life provided greater chances to develop this feminised version of their culture and helped define a tradition of Romantic women’s poetry. Women writers’ responses to the developing social and cultural climate are evidenced in their poems about the significance of sensibility, the importance of intellectual community, and the concerns of the abolitionist movement. I will discuss these topics, of certain importance in Romantic-period literary culture, in subsequent

¹ Gary Kelly, *Revolutionary Feminism: The Mind and Career of Mary Wollstonecraft* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1992), 20.

² *Ibid.*, 11.

chapters in order to examine women poets' reactions to their changing society. The established cultural views of eighteenth-century Britain were becoming increasingly challenged and subsumed by women's bold engagements with their world, especially through literature. It is important to elucidate the cultural history of the time, the position of women within the public sphere, and women's views of their culture in order to develop an accurate picture of eighteenth-century Britain.

I begin this first chapter by tracing the shifts in the cultural politics of Romantic-period British society to show that it was indeed becoming more feminised. I then explore the issues of the public/private debate with particular attention to the usefulness of applying Jürgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* to discussions of literary women of the late-eighteenth century. Next, in order to provide a clearer view of the cultural climate in which women poets operated, I examine women's social place through a comparison of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and Hannah More's *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*. Although these two important works indicate the range of feminist politics in the period and show the diversity of women's Romantic literature, they also express crucial similarities which highlight women's role within the culture. Finally, in order to explicate women's literary investment in the period, the remainder of the chapter is devoted to defining the traditions of Romantic women's poetry and several critical details of my study.

CULTURAL POLITICS OF ROMANTIC-PERIOD BRITAIN

Historical Background

Adjustment, challenge, and innovation best describe the Romantic period. Several key historical moments in British history occurred during this tumultuous

time including, but certainly not limited to: the French Revolution, heightened religious fervour, the beginnings of industrialisation, and the termination of the slave trade. The historian Eric Hobsbawm, in his work *The Age of Revolution 1789–1848*, identifies these volatile years in European history as a “‘dual revolution’—the French Revolution of 1789 and the contemporaneous (British) Industrial Revolution.”³ As industrialisation developed, Europe’s economic environment shifted; and as France’s revolutions increased in severity and size, ideological transformations happened on the continent and in Britain. In sum, multiple changes were occurring at home and abroad. As illustrated below, Britain’s answer to societal uncertainty and doubt in these revolutionary times was to design and structure their society on a model of gender differences, a model which would be challenged by those—most evidently female authors—who recognised the patriarchal bias which had become intrinsic in the nation.

It has been acknowledged by feminist critics such as Sheila Rowbotham, Sally Alexander, and Barbara Taylor, that the term “patriarchy” is somewhat problematic.⁴ For purposes of this study of Romantic-period female poets, I am applying “patriarchy” as a convenient, short-hand descriptor of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century society. The term is not used to convey greater sociological or political meaning, but is retained for its potential usefulness for examining women’s history. Gerda Lerner provides the clearest definition of patriarchy when she argues

³ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution 1789–1848* (London: Weidenfield & Nicolson, 1975), ix.

⁴ Feminist Sheila Rowbotham sparked a debate about the usefulness of the term in an essay written in the late 1970s, “The Trouble With ‘Patriarchy.’” She finds little comfort in applying what she regards as a fixed term to contemporary feminism, which is in continual transformation. In response to Rowbotham’s essay, Sally Alexander and Barbara Taylor jointly penned “In Defence of ‘Patriarchy.’” In this short piece, these social feminists assert that sexual difference is a key to understanding social structure, and that the concept of patriarchy should be preserved in studies of women’s struggles against societal iniquity in order to gauge women’s social experiences. See Sheila Rowbotham, “The Trouble With ‘Patriarchy,’” in *Dreams and Dilemmas* (London: Virago, 1983), 207–14; Sally Alexander and Barbara Taylor, “In Defence of ‘Patriarchy,’” in *Becoming a Woman and Other Essays in 19th and 20th Century Feminist History*, by Sally Alexander (London: Virago, 1994), 271–74.

that “[i]t implies that men hold power in all the important institutions of society and that women are deprived of access to such power. It does *not* imply that women are either totally powerless or totally deprived of rights, influence, and resources.”⁵

But by no means did a woman in eighteenth- or nineteenth-century British society share equal rights with men:

As Oxford law professor William Blackstone noted in his influential *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1758): ‘The husband and wife are one person in law; that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband: under whose wing, protections and cover, she performs every thing.’⁶

Certainly, women had limited rights as far as the monarchical government was concerned. Common law, the law of equity, ecclesiastical law, and Lord Hardwicke’s Act of 1754, all contributed to limiting justice for women by preventing them from acting as public agents and full citizens.⁷

Citizenship was predicated on the possession of landed property, which signified power, social status, and prosperity. This possession of land, along with the authority and respect it afforded, belonged almost wholly to men.⁸ Men were the bread winners, the owners of property, the public labourers, the influential businessmen, the powerful politicians, the acknowledged heads of the family. Women, on the other hand, were expected to mind the children, attend to household duties, act as devoted wives and mothers, support religious doctrine, and curb licentious behaviour and sexuality, remaining primarily within the private, domestic sphere of daily life. Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall argue that a man’s “social

⁵ Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 239.

⁶ Jim Powell, “Mary Wollstonecraft—Equal Rights for Women,” *The Freeman* 46, no. 4 (1996): 225.

⁷ See Jane Rendall, *Women in an Industrializing Society: England 1750–1880* (London: Basil Blackwell Inc., 1990), 34.

⁸ See Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle-Class, 1780–1850* (London: Hutchinson, 1987), 198.

power stemmed from his ownership of property, farming activities, local business and charitable activity as trustee, witness or governor. Middle-class women had no such power. The minutiae of everyday life, their personal behaviour, dress and language became their arena to judge and be judged.”⁹

Social expectations played their part in gendering the society even further. Husbands and wives had many sources at their disposal including the church, relatives, conduct books, and government, from which to gather advice on the proper regulation of control within the household, often to the detriment of women.¹⁰ Indeed, religious beliefs and faith-based communities contributed to the preservation of gender differences. Religion generated powerful opinion on domesticity, the public and private roles of women, and abolition. Yet church doctrine, particularly that of evangelicalism, often appeared torn between promoting greater roles for women and expressing counter-feminist views.

Davidoff and Hall remark that Evangelicals warned women of the vices and temptations of sexuality and condemned the use of offensive, uncouth language, while the church at large stipulated that women should remain central figures within the home to preserve men’s primary public roles.¹¹ During the difficult times of the Romantic period, the Evangelicals encouraged a revival to eliminate the spread of vice in Britain. Robert Shoemaker claims that “[u]nder the leadership initially of the Clapham Sect, the movement sought to advance moral reform through the fight against the slave trade, missionary activities, and a campaign for a reformation of manners, and it expected women to play a major but distinctive role in reform.”¹²

⁹ Ibid., 398.

¹⁰ See Robert B. Shoemaker, *Gender in English Society 1650–1850* (London: Longman, 1998), 101.

¹¹ See Davidoff and Hall, 323. They discuss women’s role in relation to domesticity. They observe that under Puritanism, women remained primarily within the household, which gave men more authority in public concerns and sustained the domestic image of women.

¹² Shoemaker, 31.

However, evangelicalism stressed the importance of maintaining domestic morality and social etiquette, and therefore consigned women, once again, to a more domestic and gendered role, even though it stressed their moral and social obligation.

Ultimately, women were still to appear domestic, feminine, and private.

On the other hand, Dissenters rejected the teachings of the Church of England with their emphasis on reason as the way to achieve greater morality and virtue.

Dissenters, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, did not have the same civic rights as British citizens who embraced the doctrines of the Church of England.

According to Jim Powell, Dissenters “promoted reform of Britain’s cozy political system” and called for the enfranchisement of citizens beyond the privileged males of the Houses.¹³

Medical publications proclaimed that women were biologically inferior to men. Prominent Drs. Johnson, Cheyne, and Whytt, for example, each conceived explanations for the differences in males and females. For instance, doctors explained sensibility in medical terminology by offering explanations of its physical effects based on the nervous and circulatory systems.¹⁴ These scientific beliefs directly explained why humans felt emotions, or even how one harmonised with the culture. Certainly, new theories of gender differences based on nerves and circulation could help defend social injustice, maintain difference between the sexes, and consequently keep women in a subordinate role in society.

If gender differences are acknowledged as acceptable markers of identity and status, then women and men are automatically placed in different social strata. As Davidoff and Hall explain it, “[m]asculinity’ and ‘femininity’ are constructs specific

¹³ Powell, 226.

¹⁴ See Markman Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility: Race, Gender and Commerce in the Sentimental Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 154. Here, Ellis discusses the significance of medical theory to sensibility, which was often coded as feminine.

to historical time and place” even though the “organization of sexual difference is central to the social world.”¹⁵ And this premise rang true in eighteenth-century times. A woman was expected, if not required, to perform her domestic duties and comply with Romantic-period notions of the proper lady. Her abilities were habitually assumed to be equal to that of any woman, yet unequal to that of any man. Indeed, it is clear that the social standing of men and women was informed by social beliefs, political practices, and governmental regulation.

Women possessed no immediate or easy means to escape this gendered identification and categorisation, especially when society’s most public and esteemed authorities such as government, the church, and medicine upheld social decorum as truth. Therefore, gender differences were often accepted as justifications for different social expectations. As a result, it was easily alleged that a woman’s proper position contrasted with that of men. Davidoff and Hall profess that the image of women as passive, private, and domestic creatures provided the middle classes with some stability in their turbulent society.¹⁶ A man’s work outside of the home potentially endowed him with social status, variations in his daily responsibilities, and a sense of accomplishment that he could share with diverse and influential public figures. Friends and colleagues could readily witness his success and participate in all aspects of his life. Women, while not confined within the home as if trapped in prison walls, were disallowed the luxury of a pronounced civic persona. However, as Amanda Vickery argues in an essay which is examined below, this view that Davidoff and Hall describe, as powerful as it was in the period, was actually under continuous scrutiny.¹⁷

¹⁵ Davidoff and Hall, 29.

¹⁶ Ibid., 397, 415.

¹⁷ See Amanda Vickery, “Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women’s History,” *The Historical Journal* 36, no.2 (1993): 398.

A Chance for Cultural Change?

Industrialisation sparked debate in work-related issues as it concerned the employment of women in more public, economic capacities. Although the industrial revolution caused changes in the organisation and operation of work-based activities, these shifts did not happen concurrently.¹⁸ As opportunities for women to work in agriculture declined, the need for cheap labour in new industries increased. Yet not all modes of manufacturing were located within the factories. Most new trades were smaller in scale and not in need of factory machinery, often requiring women to work at home. Indeed, as Shoemaker explains, “much of the industrial expansion during this period occurred by the multiplication of small, primarily home-based, units of production, not by gathering workers together in factories.”¹⁹ This method of employing women in the public industrial zone of commerce, yet sanctioning them to perform this work at home, implies a continuing emphasis on maintaining women’s roles as separate from men even though it blurs the boundaries between their public and private worlds.

This social demarcation in labour was manifest in other ways, as well. “Overall, there appears to have been a sharpening of the sexual division of labour over the course of the period, with women increasingly concentrated in tasks associated with household work and motherhood, such as domestic service, teaching, and nursing, or not working at all.”²⁰ One explanation for this gendered division could be that women were not as physically strong as men and, therefore, could not perform the tasks required of a worker such as lifting heavy supplies or operating machinery. Another account is that women’s skills were reserved for the more

¹⁸ See Rendall, 20.

¹⁹ Shoemaker, 200.

²⁰ Ibid., 190.

dextrous tasks needed in certain vocations, although men dominated the jewellery and watchmaking trades.²¹ However, these explanations do not go far enough to clarify women's lack of equal opportunity. Labouring was still unequal and gendered, the increase in opportunities for women and even equal rates of pay notwithstanding.²² Although the arguments above primarily discuss working-class experience, these social factors had ramifications for the middle-class constituency from which the women poets of this study primarily came.

Indeed, the fundamental differences in the determinants of success, worthiness, power, and respect between the men and women in Romantic-period British society caused a rift based primarily on gender between the social and acceptable places of men and women. Men were to be evaluated on their acquisition and management of properties and their roles in industry, while women were to be judged on their domestic competence. For men, the ownership of property often determined one's class. However, women's positions within society were not necessarily solely evaluated by the class affiliations of their husbands or families, but were often determined by their "feminine" responsibilities.

To clarify the term "feminine" it is practical to think of the social signifiers such as domesticity, family, relationships, and emotions which were associated with women. These concerns, steeped in the politics of gender, were not readily associated with the active, participatory, societal lives of their male counterparts. Femininity, in this period as much as any other, was a cultural construct rather than a determined biological fact. Women who advanced their lives too much outside the home were looked upon with circumspect, if not disapproving, eyes. Hence, domesticity became one of the acceptable ways for women to participate in middle-class life. The home

²¹ Ibid., 192.

²² Ibid., 170.

was to be productive, well-organised, inviting, and appropriate to one's class. "The capacity to create and beautify this type of home was becoming an expectation of natural feminine identity."²³ If one's residence was favourable and proper, then another could assume the woman of the house was a suitable wife and mother for the middle-class home. The middle-class' domestic expectations enabled women—if not personally earning money or gaining respect publicly—to gain respect in the private sphere by partaking in the familial activities of their children and husband to ensure that the home was a productive, safe, and effective environment. Essentially, if the home was successful, then the man of the house could reap the benefits from that prosperity, as well.

The image of the domestic woman was pivotal in transforming the predominant attitudes about women's role in the society. This is especially true in relation to the slave-trade debate and the protests against using West-Indian sugar, as I argue in chapter 4. A domestic woman could publicly visit with friends and family, participate in her children's school activities, and purchase goods in the market. As indicated earlier, society countenanced a woman who could readily display her domestic side. Furthermore, while a man's work outside of the home earned the family respect, money, power, and authority, women's work inside of the home was equally central to the success of the family. Yet women and men were increasingly sharing the space of the domestic on a daily basis; it cannot be denied that men participated to some degree in home life.

Revitalised images of the domestic woman crucially reconfigured the society's public/private structure. Increasingly over the period, issues with national identity became associated with the domestic. Domesticity was not only an intrinsic

²³ Davidoff and Hall, 362 and see 25.

component of the middle-class life, but it was also situated at the core of the prevailing public/private debate. Yet the way in which we should view the public and private spheres is a continual dilemma in studies of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain.

In order to explain the central issues of the public/private debate, the following section of this chapter examines Jürgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962). Although his model of the eighteenth-century public and private spheres provides important clarification, upon further critique, it is clear that there are problems in applying his thesis to the examination of women writers of the Romantic period. Essays by Lawrence Klein and Amanda Vickery elucidate the difficulties of discussing women in relation to the public and private spheres, and serve here as revisions of Habermas's thesis in relation to gender. I place my work as part of this ongoing critical debate, and argue that Habermas's model of the separate spheres ideology is problematic for the study of women's literary participation because it lacks a significant engagement with gender ideology.

THE PUBLIC / PRIVATE DEBATE

Jürgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*

Literary critics, and more commonly historians, have frequently turned to Jürgen Habermas's thesis *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* for answers as to how to comprehend the seemingly autonomous, yet confusingly amalgamated, public and private realms. Habermas's extensive work is discussed here as one important account of the relation between the public and private as it applies to eighteenth-century British culture. The intention of discussing his work is to illuminate the complexities of the debate and conclude that his arguments are

problematic for the study of women's social circumstance and, more particularly, women's writing.

Habermas attempts to construct a model of the public and private which defines each sphere in relation to the other. This synergistic approach at once lends credibility to his explanations, but also raises issues in terms of women's place within the public and private spheres. It is Habermas's contention that private individuals constitute the public sphere. Reason, necessity, and desire for societal improvement are what bring private individuals together to create the public:

The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor.²⁴

In other words, in order to claim authority and function as economic agents within their society, citizens had to form the public from the private. Through this understanding, the private sphere can in one respect be associated with the economy. In this particular development of the public sphere from the private, men are the primary contributors. Therefore, Habermas's emphasis on economy and social exchange strongly associates the birth of the public with the success of the male component of the private sphere, thus linking the two.

In fact, Habermas's model attempts to distinguish between the private economic sphere and the private sphere of the family he calls the "intimate sphere" perhaps in an attempt to specify his definitions with regard to gender. Even before the society was politically motivated and economically charged, Habermas claims confusingly that the family cultivated its own sense of the public atmosphere,

²⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Berger (Cambridge: Polity, 1989), 27.

explaining that “the subjectivity originating in the intimate sphere of the conjugal family created, so to speak, its own public.”²⁵ In this example, the private structure of the family is also seen as a model of a public environment in that individuals act in accordance with a greater whole. Women, by necessity, are included in this version of the private/public sphere although Habermas declines to assert such a gender-specific designation.

Also maintained within his argument for how the private created the public is the impact letters and coffee-houses had on distributing information during the eighteenth century, a topic discussed in chapter 3. Habermas holds that the development of the literary culture during this time nurtured the evolution of the public sphere by communicating individual politicised opinion. Habermas explains that “[t]he public sphere in the political realm evolved from the public sphere in the world of letters; through the vehicle of public opinion it put the state in touch with the needs of society.”²⁶ This finding appears to be a valid conclusion. The literary and political in this case come to represent a form of the public. Again, his argument unavoidably intersects with gender considerations. Habermas points out that “[w]omen and dependents were factually and legally excluded from the political public sphere, whereas female readers as well as apprentices and servants often took a more active part in the literary public sphere than the owners of private property and family heads themselves.”²⁷

These analyses offer a promising view of the significance of women to society as they imply that women were participants in both private and public environments. Through the cultivation of a family, women were allotted a place in a type of public

²⁵ Ibid., 29.

²⁶ Ibid., 30–31.

²⁷ Ibid., 56.

space. Also, as readers, women could participate in the public literary culture of debate alongside their male counterparts. While these points suggest some evidence that his overall thesis may be correct, several critiques of his arguments can be substantiated. Habermas untenably omits gender-specific explanations which could account for the confusing demarcation of the three spheres—economic private, domestic intimate, and literary public. In fact, his model of the three spheres is based on what is possible for male subjectivity; women cannot have a public sphere identity in his model and Habermas is perhaps uncomfortable admitting this weakness. Indeed, when Habermas's definitions of the various formations of the public from the private sphere intersect, women remain an unexplained contingent.

For example, if the public sphere is created out of the private sphere—and women are indeed part of the private sphere—then women must be participants in public life. In keeping with Habermas's economic focus, feminist critic Johanna Meehan observes that “[i]f capitalism has assigned the role of the ‘worker’ to men, it has assigned the role of consumer, which links economy and family, to women.”²⁸ At this point of intersection between the public and private spheres, women are an underdeveloped element of the Habermasian model of the social spheres. Whereas Meehan finds women a role in the public sphere by linking the economy with the family, critic Deirdre Shauna Lynch believes that Habermas regards commercialisation as a retrogressive cultural development from the early formulations of the coffee-house environment because the public sphere *does* acknowledge women. In Lynch's estimation, Habermas “narrativizes the relationship between commerce and the public sphere—outlining a process in which commercialization represents the

²⁸ Johanna Meehan, introduction to *Feminists Read Habermas: Gendering the Subject of Discourse*, ed. Meehan (London: Routledge, 1995), 7.

sad, feminized sequel to public sphere conversation.”²⁹

Yet women’s intervention was not a new phenomenon in the development of the public sphere. Habermas erroneously reports that “only men were admitted to coffee-house society...whereas the style of the *salon*, like that of the rococo in general, was essentially shaped by women. Accordingly the women of London society, abandoned every evening, waged a vigorous but vain struggle against the new institution.”³⁰ In Habermas’s view, the coffee-house environment was one in which men communicated “economic and political disputes,” but the salon reserved for females was based on fanciful rather than intellectual matters.³¹ As Elizabeth Eger and fellow editors of *Women, Writing, and the Public Sphere* argue, “[t]he inaccuracy of Habermas’s assumption that only men were admitted to the coffee-house is compounded by his assumption that female opinion was inconsequential whereas male opinion was of value to the public sphere.”³²

Certainly, if women read politically-charged literature, then they participated in the spread of knowledge and the growth of the public sphere. Indeed, as Lynch argues, “women’s histories lie outside Habermas’s purview—except, importantly, when he observes that the women who were excluded from the eighteenth-century political public did participate in the reading public that was the latter’s staging ground, the crucible in which its ideals of critical judgement were elaborated.”³³ However, it is critical to remember that women actively produced the very works that conveyed politicised opinion to the reading public.

²⁹ Deirdre Shauna Lynch, “Counter publics: shopping and women’s sociability,” in *Romantic Sociability: Social Networks and Literary Culture in Britain 1770–1810*, eds. Gillian Russell and Clara Tuite (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 214.

³⁰ Habermas, 33.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Elizabeth Eger et al., introduction to *Women, Writing, and the Public Sphere, 1700–1830*, ed. Eger et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 8.

³³ Lynch, 214.

It can be concluded that in Habermas's model of eighteenth-century Britain, two developments occurred in the formation of the public sphere. Gillian Russell and Clara Tuite summarise them as "an early eighteenth-century phase in which cultural production is primarily conceived in sociable terms and a post-1750 phase in which the 'imagined community' of print takes precedence."³⁴ Habermas endeavours to make clear his structure of eighteenth-century British society by providing three categories in which the public and private intersect. Yet it is this intersection that makes his arguments more ambiguous as the relevance of gender is overlooked. In fact, Habermas creates problems in the context of women's relationship with the public sphere because he does not take into account that only male subjectivity fits in his analysis. Distinctly absent from Habermas's argument is a definitive theorisation of women's participation in the literary culture. For purposes of this study, this deficiency in itself renders his work problematic.

Reworking Habermas's Thesis: Keeping an Eye on Gender

In his essay on the separate spheres ideology, Lawrence Klein provides a useful revision of Habermas. Klein advances the idea that when one speaks of gender differences, a system of binary oppositions is necessarily in operation. He explains that "the dichotomies of gender are often mapped against other dichotomies including the public-private distinction."³⁵ Therefore, as there is public/private, there also exists male/female, urban/rural, rich/poor, educated/uneducated, and so on. Moreover, in his investigation, Klein differentiates between several models of the public sphere, suggesting that a single definition will be unsuitable for all discussions. He

³⁴ Gillian Russell and Clara Tuite, "Introducing Romantic Sociability," in *Romantic Sociability: Social Networks and Literary Culture in Britain 1770–1840*, eds. Russell and Tuite (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 13.

³⁵ Lawrence E. Klein, "Gender and the Public/Private Distinction in the Eighteenth Century: Some Questions about Evidence and Analytic Procedure," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 29, no. 1 (1996): 98.

locates four classifications of the public: the “magisterial,” “civic,” “economic,” and “associative.”³⁶ The “magisterial public sphere” is the sector of the society run by the State, while the private is equated with everything that is not State-controlled. Here, women were manifestly denied participation. The “civic” form of public society designates all of those who are not directly involved with the workings of the State. The public, in this definition, refers to the society as a whole, allowing women a space in the public domain. In the “economic public sphere,” money matters transpired on both private and public fronts. However, Klein categorises the economic affairs of Romantic-period citizens as being essentially public because he believes that acts of production and consumption occurred primarily in public spaces.³⁷ Finally, the “associative” sphere defines those activities which were cultural and informative. In this model, it is granted that women also claimed some right to a “public” environment. While these essentialist terms invalidate potential alternative categories of the public, it is Klein’s theory of the existence of manifold interpretations of the public and private that is important here.

Amanda Vickery, in her informative and bold historical analysis of the separate spheres ideology entitled “Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women’s History,” suggests that the terms “public” and “private” are ambiguous at best in terms of the position of women. Vickery’s essay, which can be regarded as a controversial challenge to Davidoff’s and Hall’s work, questions the assumptions upon which Davidoff and Hall stake their claims about the structure of the public and private spheres. Vickery believes that “[a]s a sociological study of a particular set of gender relations at a particular historical moment, *Family Fortunes* has much to offer to the next generation of

³⁶ Ibid., 104.

³⁷ Ibid.

women's historians, but the overarching historical narrative it seeks to tell should be discussed and debated, not given the unwarranted status of holy writ."³⁸ She argues that while attempting to elucidate the historical importance of male influence in the period and also highlight women's history, Davidoff and Hall rely on the following: stringent and sometimes dated views of the middle-class societal structure, the significance of the economic changes from industrialisation in the 1780s, and the prominence of domesticity in the Victorian era. Vickery finds fault with the structure of their argument because it fails to allow for a more critical development of the public/private dichotomy in the era. She believes that wider evidence for the expansion of women's roles inside and outside the home shows that historians must present more flexible representations of the public and private spheres, a characterisation that Davidoff and Hall do not allow.

Essentially, Vickery contends that the terms "public" and "private" reinforce an age-old idea of the differences between men and women.³⁹ If a sense of the private and public has existed throughout time, then the eighteenth century is surely a victim of this trend of societal inheritance. There is no reason to believe that previous depictions of the public and private satisfactorily summarise the eighteenth-century's model as women's changing roles often challenged the structure of these spheres by blurring their boundaries. But, it is possible that these debates, in addition to "the rise of the new domestic woman,...and the construction of the public and private are all different ways of characterizing what is essentially the same phenomenon: the marginalization of middle-class women."⁴⁰

Indeed, greater participation and acceptance in the public realms did not come easily. It was especially difficult because of women's denial of an education by the

³⁸ Vickery, 401.

³⁹ Ibid., 411.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 412.

patriarchal society, a point stressed in Mary Scott's poetic petition. Sylvia Harcstark Meyers argues that "the educational deprivation of women and the persistent denigration of their abilities under patriarchy has had a pervasive inhibiting influence on women with intellectual interests."⁴¹ Although some women were educated in the home, society dictated that women would not be given the same educational opportunities as men. However, women located several means by which to accumulate knowledge. Some girls were taught at home by learned fathers and literate mothers. Other children were able to attend lessons at schools, while some children from wealthier families even went to boarding schools. Even the working classes had the opportunity to enlighten themselves through patronage, stories, public libraries, and friends. The disparity between the educational opportunities given to men and women occupied the minds and writings of several women authors of the day. Mary Scott is only one example of a Romantic female writer who challenged this social difference between the sexes. Other female authors also chose to attack the prevailing inequality by wielding their pens.

My next section provides an analysis of women writers' perceptions of late-eighteenth-century British culture and women's social place through a comparison of the polemical works of the Dissenter Mary Wollstonecraft and the Evangelical Hannah More. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) and *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799) are useful indications of the scope of political viewpoints embraced by literary women in the Romantic period. It is important to keep in mind that Wollstonecraft and More are not the only two women who wrote notable polemical works. Still, while their writings represent an index of the political possibilities of feminism at the time of Romanticism, several of their

⁴¹ Sylvia Harcstark Meyers, *The Bluestocking Circle: Women, Friendship, and the Life of the Mind in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 153.

arguments for women's social advancement are remarkably alike and are highlighted here. Moreover, many of the topics covered within these works—such as sensibility, domesticity, education, and reason—are related to subsequent chapters of this dissertation. Indeed, many scholars including Barbara Caine, Kathryn Sutherland, Mitzi Myers, and Harriet Guest, to name a few, have compared the works of these two prominent female authors in their analyses of Romantic women writers. I participate in this discussion by emphasising that although the similarities found within More's and Wollstonecraft's arguments attest to the common convictions of literary women regardless of political affiliations, their works most significantly verify the diversity of the literary culture and the complexity of feminism in the Romantic period.

WOMEN'S SOCIAL PLACE: WOLLSTONECRAFT AND MORE RECONSIDERED

It might be argued that two main views of the intellectual rights and public positions of women emerged during this period and are encapsulated within Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and Hannah More's *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*. These women's main objectives—to emphasise the need for social reform for women through collective action, to advance the educational opportunities for women, to discuss marriage and relationship issues, and to bolster women's participation in public life and the community—are strikingly similar. Yet some critics maintain that because these convictions are based on opposing ideologies, More's and Wollstonecraft's arguments are fundamentally dissimilar. Wollstonecraft presents a dissenting view of the society to her middle-class audience and protests against patriarchal institutions. Her main goal is to refine women's social identity in order to assert their right to education and an involvement in public life. Alternatively, the Evangelical Hannah More stipulates the maintenance

of class divisions and the current system of patriarchy in order to ameliorate the conditions of the poor and extend educational opportunities.

It would be conceivable to declare that while these women individually support opposing ideologies, the similarities in both of their arguments allude to More's potential to endorse more progressive ideas and, possibly, Wollstonecraft's conservative tendencies in light of eighteenth-century feminism.⁴² Still, as Mitzi Myers argues, "[i]n their different ways, they seek to endow woman's role with more competence, dignity, and consequence."⁴³ Ultimately, both Wollstonecraft and More want women's lives to improve, including the lives of literary women.

Mary Wollstonecraft: A Polemic Technique for Feminising the Culture

Mary Wollstonecraft, born in 1759 to an unsuccessful farmer and his wife, led a life marked by tragedy, passion, and conviction. Her life experiences shaped her views on the status of women in the eighteenth-century. She established a school near London, she was a governess to a wealthy Irish family, she acted as a reviewer and editor for the *Analytical Review*, and she was a feminist writer and novelist. Her friendships with women such as Fanny Blood, Helen Maria Williams, and Mary Hays, also helped solidify her opinions about the wrongs of society's patriarchal structure. She struggled to gain independence, and eventually earned the respect of some of the most esteemed writers and intellectuals of her time.

Yet her dependence on the men in her life throws an interesting light on the woman long known for her feminist convictions. Her infatuation with the married

⁴² See Barbara Caine, *English Feminism, 1780–1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 51. Caine states, "While none of this makes one wish to claim More a feminist, the similarity between her and Wollstonecraft on some points serves in turn to suggest the conservatism of some of Wollstonecraft's ideas and of her approach to questions about women's education and family life." Alternatively, I argue that the similarities do show More as a (conservative) feminist but also Wollstonecraft's conservative tendencies.

⁴³ Mitzi Myers, "Reform or Ruin: 'A Revolution in Female Manners,'" *Studies in 18th Century Culture* 11 (1982): 201.

Henry Fuseli, her obsession with Gilbert Imlay, and her love for husband William Godwin has caused some critics to doubt her ideologies and deem her feminist works specious. However, it is important to note that during her lifetime, the *Vindication* was received with minimal hostility and criticism. Upon her death, Godwin published Wollstonecraft's memoirs and letters which described in great detail her individualistic lifestyle. Only then did her work, and her standing as a feminist, suffer.

Therefore, these intense relationships should be seen in the context of Wollstonecraft's ardent disposition and unconventional lifestyle. "By the end of her life, [Mary Wollstonecraft] was aware of the exposed position her unconventional acts had given her but sure of the feminist propositions she had been struggling to advance through most of her writing career."⁴⁴ In other words, even if her own fallibility prevented her from fulfilling the ideas her *Vindication* promoted, she truly believed in those goals. She tragically died in 1797 from complications of childbirth.

Wollstonecraft presents her feminist views in her polemical, most famous work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in which she calls for a dynamic shift in the hierarchical gender delineations rampant within her society.⁴⁵ Barbara Caine argues that "[w]hat she sought was...the recognition that sexual difference occurred within a common humanity, and that it should cease to be seen and expressed in hierarchical terms."⁴⁶ Responding to a proposal laid by Charles Talleyrand-Perigord, a French diplomat, on the educational systems in revolutionary France, Wollstonecraft

⁴⁴ Janet Todd, "Wollstonecraft, Mary," in *A Dictionary of British and American Women Writers 1660–1800*, ed. Todd (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1984), 332. All biographical information taken from this source.

⁴⁵ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792; reprint, 2nd ed. with preface and additional criticism, ed. Carol H. Poston, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1988). All references to the *Vindication* will refer to this edition. Henceforth, page numbers will be given in brackets following each quote.

⁴⁶ Caine, 24.

“loudly demands JUSTICE for one half of the human race”(6). Talleyrand-Perigord’s report failed to integrate females within the scheme. This report, along with several other works by influential male authors of the day, including Edmund Burke and Dr. Johnson, provoked Wollstonecraft to speak on behalf of her sex and claim their rights to equal education. Wollstonecraft herself admits that “all the writers who have written on the subject of female education and manners from Rousseau to Dr. Gregory have contributed to render women more artificial, weak characters, than they would otherwise have been; and, consequently, more useless members of society”(22). Essentially, Wollstonecraft believed women should be freed from unjustified societal limitations and empowered with equal opportunities. It is evident from the progressive content of the *Vindication*, as well as from the work’s powerful title, that Wollstonecraft hoped her feminist work would function as a political catalyst for societal change. She firmly believed that it was “time to effect a *revolution* in female manners—time to restore to them their lost dignity—and make them, as part of the human species, labour by reforming themselves to reform the world”(45, my emphasis).

Wollstonecraft states that it is her aim “to render my sex more respectable members of society”(10). She frequently refers to the aggregate of women as “my own sex” as if to assert that all women at least share this basic commonality. This arrangement endows her proclamation for collective action with greater authority. She says that “[i]t is not necessary for me to always premise that I speak of the condition of the whole sex, leaving exceptions out of the question”(60). She chooses not only to group women together in order to argue their capacity more forcefully, but also to emphasise the need to consider women in general potentially valuable components of British culture.

However, her “revolution” cannot simply be undertaken by one half of the society, namely women; the whole of the nation must be transformed to allow women acceptance and advancement. Hence, Wollstonecraft must appeal to all members of the society, men and women. A passage which convincingly highlights Wollstonecraft’s aim in instructing the male population is located in chapter nine of her work when she addresses men directly and forcefully:

I then would fain convince reasonable men of the importance of some of my remarks, and prevail on them to weigh dispassionately the whole tenor of my observations. – I appeal to their understandings; and, as a fellow-creature, claim, in the name of my sex, some interest in their hearts. I entreat them to assist to emancipate their companion, to make her a *help meet* for them!”(149–50)

This statement alerts the reader that she anticipates, if not hopes, to reach the male contingent of her readers. Indeed, she must petition men even indirectly within her work if her plans are to be put into action. The argument for her confident expectation, if not purely need, of both male and female readers is explained thus: if the views of the culture must change, and the public has largely been governed by the manners and opinions of men, then Wollstonecraft must entreat men to improve the society and help change the patriarchal philosophy within the community.

In stark contrast to her inclusive appeal to both sexes, Wollstonecraft’s intended audience is remarkably limited in terms of class. It is unequivocal from the beginning of the *Vindication* that she addresses primarily the men and women of the middle-classes as she finds their societal ranking “to be in the most natural state”(9). Lacking titles, pomp, and inflated status, they were also free from the clutches of poverty. This class stipulation is both important and complex. As a follower of both Reverend Richard Price, one of the heads of the Dissenters, and Reverend Joseph Priestley, she adopted their beliefs and ideas. G.J. Barker-Benfield points out that

“they were deeply critical of the luxury and dissipation of the ‘ins,’ the ruling class. Conversely, they presented ‘the middling people’ as the repository of morality and civic virtue.”⁴⁷ Wollstonecraft often makes clear that she is speaking of women, “as well as the rich of both sexes,” when she speaks of “the follies and vices of civilization”(60). The upper class not only exhibits the worst excesses of femininity, but it is also the stratum of the commonwealth which is most associated with frivolity, excess, and falseness. Barbara Taylor argues that this class-structured argument is strategic. Taylor’s view is that Wollstonecraft represents the negativity of the upper class “as a way of flattering the cultural sensibilities of men and women of her own background, but more importantly because elite women played a central symbolic role in eighteenth-century political thought,” views which Wollstonecraft sought to overturn.⁴⁸ In turn, Wollstonecraft’s political convictions influenced her need to signify the middle classes as her suitable audience.

Therefore, two points about the work’s intended audience are certain: the emphasis on the middle-class and Wollstonecraft’s petition to both sexes. Where class and gender interact, however, the nature of the intended audience is more problematic. It is possible that Wollstonecraft is acknowledging the dominance of the male middle-class in the public sphere and the lack of agency of the female middle-class within this realm. In order to challenge the patriarchal society, it is necessary for Wollstonecraft to appeal to middle-class men; no change will be forthcoming without the efforts of women of all classes. However, Wollstonecraft’s argument is problematic because of its contradictory appeal to middle-class women who lack

⁴⁷ G.J. Barker-Benfield, “Mary Wollstonecraft: Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthwoman,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 50, no.1 (1989): 97.

⁴⁸ Barbara Taylor, “Misogyny and Feminism: The Case of Mary Wollstonecraft,” *Constellations* 6, no. 4 (1999): 502.

agency, yet must become powerful in order to change the society.⁴⁹

Additionally, Wollstonecraft's polemic has often been contested by feminist critics, historians, and literary critics in light of the apparent unevenness within her main arguments. Elissa S. Guralnick, Cora Kaplan, and Amy Elizabeth Smith all critique this disorderliness of Wollstonecraft's work in their studies of the *Vindication* with respect to the intended audience.⁵⁰ Smith, for example, feels that "[t]he work's reputation for unevenness arises primarily from its being aimed at more than one audience—and at audiences who were each to play very different roles in the proposed revolution."⁵¹ Wollstonecraft does not wish to argue that the sexes are alike. When she writes, "[l]et it not be concluded that I wish to invert the order of things"(26), she upholds the notion that men and women are fundamentally different and should remain so. In harmony with this view, Wollstonecraft must acknowledge these sexual differences within her discussion and address multiple audiences, relative to gender, if her argument is to be credible.

Indeed, Wollstonecraft sometimes argues for equality among the sexes, yet at other times emphasises gender differences. This disparity is part of Wollstonecraft's polemical technique, her strategy for expressing her feminist convictions. Frequently, Wollstonecraft's view is also both striking and calm, locating a balance in her written voice between feminine composure and emotion, and masculine strength and intensity. Wollstonecraft is sensible to incorporate the two different approaches within her work because it is indeed this composition that is manifest, if not requisite,

⁴⁹ See Anna Wilson, "Mary Wollstonecraft and the Search for the Radical Woman," *Genders* no.6 (1989): 94.

⁵⁰ See Elissa S. Guralnick, "Rhetorical Strategy in Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*," *The Humanities Association Review* 30, no.3 (1979): 174–85; Cora Kaplan, "Wild Nights: Pleasure/Sexuality/Feminism," in *The Ideology of Conduct: Essays on Literature and the History of Sexuality*, eds. Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse (New York: Methuen, 1987), 160–83.

⁵¹ Amy Elizabeth Smith, "Roles for Readers in Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*," *Studies in English Literature 1500–1900* 32 (1992): 556.

in all of her claims and her discussions on education, sensibility, reason, and domesticity. Therefore, the irregularity that readers so often find not only adds depth and complexity to her argument, but also equips her plan with a greater chance of success.

Wollstonecraft believes that female liberation will be achieved by altering perceptions of female education, sensibility, reason, and domesticity. It should be noted that she does not address each of these issues separately. On the contrary, she presents a holistic argument whereby progression in any one aspect of female life is dependent upon and inseparable from the altering of more general perceptions; educational reform, for example, can only be achieved concurrently with reformed ideas of sensibility, reason, and domesticity. Taylor points out that “[t]o the eighteenth-century mind, reason and imagination, public professions and private emotions were inseparably (if often problematically) conjoined.”⁵² Despite Wollstonecraft’s fervent appeals to men, it remains her hope that women themselves will gain the drive required to entreat the nation to grant women respect, intellect, and merit.

According to Wollstonecraft, society is connected by three important elements: the successful integration of “reason, virtue, and knowledge”(12) among its citizens. By reason, Wollstonecraft means “the simple power of improvement; or, more properly speaking, of discerning truth”(53). Accordingly, Wollstonecraft believes that “every being may become virtuous by the exercise of its own reason”(21). Wollstonecraft argues, in the tradition of Dissenting belief, that reason itself is connected with the divine because all humans have been given the power to reason by God: “but the nature of reason must be the same in all, if it be an emanation

⁵² Barbara Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 19.

of divinity, the tie that connects the creature with the Creator; for, can that soul be stamped with the heavenly image, that is not perfected by the exercise of its own reason?"(53). In this example, reason is extended to men and women by God's divine authority. Although Wollstonecraft does not infuse religious doctrine into her work, she does use religion to reinforce her argument and extend reason to women.

However, if women are to become discerning and moral members of their society, then they must be able to possess knowledge, like their male counterparts:

But I still insist, that not only the virtue, but the *knowledge* of the two sexes should be the same in nature, if not in degree, and that women, considered not only as moral, but rational creatures, ought to endeavour to acquire human virtues (or perfections) by the *same* means as men, instead of being educated like a fanciful kind of half being.(39)

Even though each citizen is responsible for the implementation of the two essential components of virtue and reason, society as a whole must ensure that its citizens are empowered with intellect. Wollstonecraft believes education will strengthen the individual through emphasis on virtue; as one learns the methods by which to enhance the understanding of their obligations as human beings for the greater good of society, one will become more independent and therefore a stronger, self-sufficient, and discerning citizen. In her second chapter, Wollstonecraft proclaims that "[m]en and women must be educated, in a great degree, by the opinions and manners of the society they live in"(21). Subsequently, since both men and women are to be catalysts of change in their community, their educational system is altered by a combination of masculine and feminine elements. "Consequently, the most perfect education," according to Wollstonecraft, "is such an exercise of the understanding as is best calculated to strengthen the body and form the heart"(21).

Yet her solution creates confusion and contradiction as the element of feeling enters her discussion. Wollstonecraft's estimates of sensibility, one of the established

principles of her argument, provide the clearest example of this inconsistency. Men continue to degrade women by enforcing the notion that women are foolish beings. Wollstonecraft declares, "I shall only insist that men have increased that inferiority till women are almost sunk below the standard of rational creatures"(35). Indeed, the patriarchal society has managed to create what Wollstonecraft labels a "false system of female manners"(53) whereby women are kept "always in a state of childhood"(20). Wollstonecraft forcefully describes those women who are consumed with false refinements thus: "Their senses are inflamed, and their understandings neglected, consequently they become the prey of their senses, delicately termed sensibility, and are blown about by every momentary gust of feeling"(60). Moreover, women are powerless to overcome this restriction "because it is by their sensibility that they obtain present power"(61).

Wollstonecraft rhetorically asks, "And what is sensibility?" She replies, sarcastically, "'Quickness of sensation; quickness of perception; delicacy.' Thus it is defined by Dr. Johnson"(63), ironically one of the men whose works she is responding to in her *Vindication*. Sensibility, in this reading, is very much a male construction rather than an inherent feminine quality. It is this male fabrication of women as creatures overcome with sensibility and overbearing emotion that invariably labels women as irrational beings.

Nevertheless, Wollstonecraft does not wish for women to abandon sensibility altogether. Rather, they should reject the male account of sensibility which reinforces the reputation of women as the "frivolous sex"(10). After all, as Wollstonecraft concedes, "[w]omen are supposed to possess more sensibility...than men, and their strong attachments and instantaneous emotions of compassion are given as

proofs”(188). Indeed, for women, feelings can be an important asset to gaining knowledge and reason considering that “the passions should unfold our reason”(14).

In Wollstonecraft’s argument for an education that amalgamates the masculine and feminine, Catriona Mackenzie locates “the view that in a well-balanced, virtuous character, reason and sensibility should mutually strengthen and support each other rather than either dominating the other.”⁵³ Although Wollstonecraft believes that sensibility remains an important feminine characteristic, paradoxically, every time women display heightened emotions, they reaffirm existing male perceptions of females and strengthen the social status quo. Syndy McMillen Conger finds that “[s]ometimes she treats that language as if it were the most important means she has to set herself free; at other times she treats it with profound suspicion, as if it were man’s primary engine of mind control and oppression. Sometimes, in other words, language is woman’s tool; sometimes it is man’s weapon.”⁵⁴ It is important to acknowledge once again, however, that these inconsistencies are part of Wollstonecraft’s strategy to argue for equality by highlighting sexual difference; she wants to have it both ways.

The domestic sphere, and most importantly marriage, is the area of a woman’s life where she is able to display and use her feelings effectively and properly. Admitting that feelings should reign in matters of the heart, Wollstonecraft writes, “[w]ith a lover, I grant, she should be so, and her sensibility will naturally lead her to endeavour to excite emotion, not to gratify her vanity, but her heart”(56). Moreover, Wollstonecraft shows she values the institution of marriage in her words, “as highly as I respect marriage”(71). Yet there are conditions. Again, she appeals to both

⁵³ Catriona Mackenzie, “Reason and Sensibility: The Ideal of Women’s Self-Governance in the Writings of Mary Wollstonecraft,” *Hypatia* 8, no.4 (1993): 44.

⁵⁴ Syndy McMillen Conger, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Language of Sensibility* (London: Associated University Press, 1994), xxiii.

sexes and advocates a more balanced union. First, she appeals to women:

the woman who strengthens her body and exercises her mind will, by managing her family and practising various virtues, become the friend, and not the humble dependent of her husband; and if she, by possessing such substantial qualities, merit his regard, she will not find it necessary to conceal her affection, nor to pretend to an unnatural coldness of constitution to excite her husband's passions.(29)

In this plea, Wollstonecraft emphasises that women can be educated, independent, and still retain a passionate, loving partnership. Then, she appeals to men: "Would men but generously snap our chains, and be content with rational fellowship instead of slavish obedience, they would find us more observant daughters, more affectionate sisters, more faithful wives, more reasonable mothers—in a word, better citizens"(150). In other words, if men permit women to acquire and develop reason, then women will respond by displaying more magnanimous, instead of trifling, feelings.

In her vision of an improved Britain, Wollstonecraft desires women to consolidate their determinations, wills, and aspirations in order to bestow agency on the female sex. However, part of their improvement requires the restraint of sensibility and a reduction in more feminine behaviours. At times Wollstonecraft seems to be emphasising the need for women to fulfil the essential "feminine" element of society—wife, mother, carer, domestic representative—yet she argues that they must curb these behaviours and adopt more masculine refinements. Adela Pinch claims it is "possible to argue that in spite of her attacks on sensibility, Wollstonecraft's writings were fundamentally indebted to a political and literary culture that emphasized feelings."⁵⁵ Moira Ferguson agrees with this account but

⁵⁵ Adela Pinch, *Strange Fits of Passion: Epistemologies of Emotion, Hume to Austen* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 55.

adds that Wollstonecraft's "adherence to a bourgeois liberal politic, which bestowed political primacy on the middle class, snagged her in contradictions from which she was never philosophically able to extricate herself."⁵⁶ Yet according to McMillen Conger, "[t]he intensity of her attack on sensibility, of course, can be read as symptomatic of her difficulty with letting it go."⁵⁷

It is true that Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* relies heavily on retaining certain "feminine" characteristics and designating feeling as an appropriate tool for women's advancement. But, unlike the above critics who insist on finding fault with the inconsistencies in her work, I find that Wollstonecraft's strategy to amalgamate masculine and feminine makes her inconsistencies a valuable part of her polemical technique. Precisely, her new and perhaps utopian eighteenth-century society does mix feminine with masculine in both the public and private spheres. Indeed, Wollstonecraft combined conservative with more progressive modes of feminism, and should not be seen just as an advocate of more progressive ideas. This amalgamation and feminisation was not only her aim for society, but was also her methodology throughout the *Vindication*.

To Caine, "it has become evident that it is necessary to look at her not just as an isolated individual, greatly 'ahead of her time', but rather within the context of the late eighteenth-century expansion in literature as a profession for women."⁵⁸ Importantly, Wollstonecraft's disquisition not only offers some understanding of one of the eighteenth-century's most intriguing women writers, but also provides historical evidence of the gendered society in eighteenth-century Britain and is a valuable marker of feminism in the period. Wollstonecraft's chief tenets—education,

⁵⁶ Moira Ferguson, *First Feminists—British Women Writers 1578–1799* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1985), 26.

⁵⁷ Conger, 123.

⁵⁸ Caine, 12.

sensibility, reason, and domesticity—are especially important to the examination here and are all issues which are central to the study of women writers of her day.

Hannah More: Religion and the Conservative Side of Feminism

A contemporary of Wollstonecraft, Hannah More similarly found literature to be not only an appropriate means of communicating her account of the status of women, but also a beneficial tool for endorsing and initiating societal change. Born in Bristol in 1745, More led a simple, yet prosperous life which held religious belief at its core. A precocious and inquisitive child, More learned quickly under the guidance of her strict father and followed in his footsteps when she became a teacher, along with her sisters, at a school founded by the family. This early introduction to education was to lay the foundation for her lifelong mission to instruct the masses on the methods of living a righteous, more fulfilling life.

Yet this transformation from school teacher to public advocate for social change did not progress without tribulations and difficulties. A failed betrothal to an older gentleman, several episodes of poor health, frequent moves to new towns, and new friendships with influential members of intellectual London society all contributed to forming the woman writer and moral instructor many eighteenth-century Britons respected. It is crucial to bear in mind that, following her unsuccessful engagement, More pledged to remain single for the remainder of her life. This affirmation of her autonomy reinforces that More was not a weak woman dependent on men but a strong-willed female who believed in the vitality of her own sex. Her convictions grew increasingly resolute with time; as her religious beliefs intensified, it seems her desire to edify the populace grew. Throughout the various stages of her adult life, More relied on the written word to promote her evangelical

ideas and trusted her intellectual friends to support and encourage her endeavours. She continued to write instructional works until a few years before her death when her mental health began to decline. More's wealth, accrued from her copious literary successes, was donated to charitable foundations and religious groups upon her death in 1833.⁵⁹

Seven years after Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* and possibly as a rejoinder to her polemic, More published her lengthy *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*.⁶⁰ In this work, More discusses Britain's flaws and determines that education and pious living should be encouraged in women's lives. She embraces her cause to ameliorate the nation—by emphasising the failings of society and suggesting methods of improvement—because she feels that she is duty-bound to refine its subjects. She claims that she writes “to expose the weakness of the land as to suggest the necessity of internal improvement, and to point out the means of effectual defence, is not treachery, but patriotism”(x). More's objective is not necessarily to supply methods for women to escape gender boundaries, but to improve the kingdom in which they live. It is possible to regard the *Strictures* as quite moderate in its content: More discusses women's proper religious duties, refuses to abolish the patriarchal system, supplies a limited definition of education, and allows a finite amount of movement for women outside of the domestic sphere. In this same work, however, she shows her tendencies toward more overtly feminist thinking: she boldly uses masculine and scientific language, supports education for women, expounds the

⁵⁹ Margarette Smith, “More, Hannah,” in *A Dictionary of British and American Women Writers 1660–1800*, ed. Janet Todd (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1984), 224–27.

⁶⁰ Hannah More, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education; with a view of the Principles and Conduct prevalent among Women of Rank and Fortune* (1799; reprint (2 vols. in 1), with intro. by Jonathan Wordsworth, Oxford: Woodstock Books, 1995). All references refer to this reprint unless otherwise noted.

benefits of controlled sensibility, approves of marriage and the family, and places women at the core of moral society.

This paradox, of course, presents a problem for twentieth and twenty-first century feminism which has often attempted to repress conservative forms of feminism such as More's. The project of reclaiming More as an important figure in the intellectual history of feminism has recently been debated by critics and historians alike. However, in the context of the eighteenth century, her more feminist leanings (although More would have objected to the use of the term) support claims for the changing regard for women, the increasing feminisation of culture, the importance of feeling, and diversity. I find that these principles clearly validate the *Strictures* as an example of a feminist work which embraces the concerns of the Romantic period. Therefore, More's *Strictures* is examined alongside Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* as a significant contribution to what can be considered eighteenth-century feminism, an intricate combination of the moderate and progressive.

Although More refers to women collectively as "her sex"(x), no sense of her identification with all women is conveyed in her work. More wants all women's lives to improve, yet she most frequently addresses upper class women within her work. More admits that even though she surveys the society from "her own limited sphere of observation, the Author is acquainted with much excellence in the class of which she treats"(x). She describes these women, who are higher up the social scale than the women Wollstonecraft addresses in the *Vindication*, thus:

women who, possessing learning which would be thought extensive in the other sex, set an example of deep humility to their own; – women who, distinguished for wit and genius, are eminent for domestic qualities; – who, excelling in the fine arts, have carefully enriched their understandings; – who, enjoying great affluence, devote it to the glory of God; – who possessing elevated rank, think their noblest style and title is that of a Christian. (xii)

She does not identify with the lower orders, but with the redeemed upper-class women she holds in esteem. Besides, the upper classes conform to and endorse the sexual divisions she wants to uphold more than the lower classes are able to. As she views her work as a duty to the people, similarly, she considers it the responsibility of “[y]oung ladies...to set apart a fixed portion of their time, as sacred to the poor, whether in relieving, instructing, or working for them”(Vol.1, 127–28). Therefore, the moral and philanthropic women of rank and fortune “are loudly called upon to act as the guardians of the public taste as well as of the public virtue”(Vol.1, 39).

Marlon B. Ross argues that by considering upper-class women’s “influence a ‘talent,’” More converts traditional “feminine passivity to feminine activity.”⁶¹ It is necessary to delineate two modes of female activity. First, as Ross contends, upper class women are granted agency by being given the responsibility of improving others. Secondly, in More’s scheme, the upper classes disseminate morality through the society from the top down. Thus, the consequence of the activity of women of rank and fortune is the potential for activity for all women. Moreover, this establishes a community of women as they are called upon by More to improve each other. It is important to note that More specifies that the religious, domestic, and educated women of rank and fortune are her moral exemplars. However, she reserves several chapters throughout the *Strictures* to critique the behaviours of the upper classes that she still finds contemptible.

The particularly repellent social ills that More wants to eliminate include: the depravity of the arts, the presence of masculine behaviours in women, excessive vanity, and the mismanagement of sensibility and feelings. One of the main contributors of baseness in women is the arts. “[I]t will be prudent,” More declares,

⁶¹ Marlon B. Ross, *The Contours of Masculine Desire: Romanticism and the Rise of Women’s Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 205.

“to reflect that in all polished countries an entire devotedness to the fine arts has been one grand source of the corruption of the women”(Vol.1, 81). As More goes on to explain, in ancient Greek society, women were not allowed to cultivate a great desire for the arts in order to keep their integrity sound. More argues that women in refined nations possess too weak a constitution to avoid the depravity of the arts. She does not consider that the possible cause of degradation may be society’s mistreatment of the arts. Instead, she reasons that women should not partake in the arts because of their gender and stereotypical weakness for overindulgence.

Indeed, appropriate gender roles are a significant component of More’s thesis. For example, she makes clear her belief that masculine behaviours in women are considered vulgar: “I am not sounding an alarm to female warriors or exciting female politicians: I hardly know which of the two is the most disgusting and unnatural character”(Vol.1, 6). This example reinforces the idea that the types of women who do not accord with society are those who display the lowest levels of feminine behaviour in public. Patently, More does not endorse the blurring of gender boundaries. Nevertheless, she condemns this unavoidable barrier to women’s advancement when she candidly defines women’s struggles: “she will have to encounter the mortifying circumstance of having her sex always taken into account”(Vol.2, 13). Therefore, More emphasises that women should not attempt to alter or debase the feminine characteristics of their gender, and that society is to blame for the improper judgement of women.

Intriguingly, More often uses the language of biology and science, traditionally masculine domains, to describe these objectionable social ills. For example, vanity is an imperfection which descends through the classes, affecting numerous people. More feels that “the middle orders have caught the contagion, and

it rages downward with increasing violence”(Vol.1, 69). Note, by mere elimination, More implies that the upper classes have the means to defend this vice. This account has elements of scientific description as vanity is described as a disease attacking the body; it can spread voraciously through a culture, destroying virtue and impairing one’s character.

Additionally, More describes the presence of emotion in the same scientific manner: “it is not confined in its operation to the eye, or the ear, or any single organ, but diffused through the whole being, alive in every part, awakened and communicated by the slightest touch”(Vol.1, 68). Feeling, according to More, is a threatening response. “When feeling stimulates only to self-indulgence; when the more exquisite affections of sympathy and pity evaporate in sentiment, instead of flowing out in active charity, and affording assistance, protection, or consolation to every species of distress; it is an evidence that the feeling is of a spurious kind”(Vol. 2, 129).

As she further explains, passions must not overpower one’s sensibility; otherwise, terrible sins may be committed. More suggests that “if we were to inquire into the remote cause of some of the blackest crimes which stain the annals of mankind, profligacy, murder, and especially suicide, we might trace them back to this original principle, an ungoverned Sensibility”(Vol.2, 102). Like a germ, sensibility is potentially dangerous if it overwhelms the body. Still, if one’s sensibility is controlled by divine authority, one can receive “true direction”(Vol.2, 118) and use it for a greater good. Historian Chris Jones points out that “[e]ven evangelicals, with their stress on innate depravity, wished to enlist sensibility as an ally. Hannah More praised a ‘chastised’ sensibility.”⁶² Although More argues that some emotions are

⁶² Chris Jones, *Radical Sensibility: Literature and ideas in the 1790s* (London: Routledge, 1993), 4.

best abandoned, she clearly maintains the benefits and values of controlled feelings. Truly, More's aim throughout the *Strictures* is to exalt the moral elements of "feminine" characteristics and aggrandise the power of religion to relieve the masses.

In keeping with her evangelical faith, most of More's arguments are indeed fortified by religion. She believes that this religious emphasis instantaneously gives her statements a supernatural authority. More attempts to convince the reader that "it is a matter of inconceivable importance, though not perhaps sufficiently considered when any popular work, not on a religious topic, but on any common subject, such as politics, history, or science, has happened to be written by an author of sound Christian principles"(Vol.1, 29). By boasting of her own religious cognisance, More hopes to give herself and her work a certain gravitas. In addition, by placing her volumes among other important compositions on various subjects, More further demands greater authority and approval. In her emphases on women's religious convictions and "divine authority" as cultural mainstays, Sutherland feels that "More appeals to gender solidarity."⁶³ An example of this may be when More "call[s] on women to reflect that our religion has not only made them heirs to a blessed immortality hereafter, but has greatly raised them in the scale of being here, by lifting them to an importance in society unknown to the most polished ages of antiquity"(Vol.2, 40).

Occasionally, More uses historical precedent as a defence of her arguments, claiming that the failures and downfalls of the Roman Empire and the corruption of the East are exemplary of what could become of Britain. Yet she does not wish the reader to presume that she is comparing "the gentleness of British government

⁶³ Kathryn Sutherland, "Writings on education and conduct: arguments for female improvement," in *Women and Literature in Britain 1700–1800*, ed. Vivien Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 41.

with the rapacity of Roman conquests, or the tyrannical principles of Roman dominion....With such *dictatorial*, or as we might now read, *directorial* inquisitors, we can have no point of contact.”⁶⁴ In this footnote to her work, More perhaps overly protests the negative aspects of this foreign and, as she sees it, corrupt ancient empire. Like the passage above in which she considers herself a patriot, her language and tone are defensive and masculine.

Still, More may simply be implying that women, her intended audience and conceivably the “we” she addresses, should resist the type of iniquity to which she thinks the ancient Roman people fell victim. Her notion of the progress of civilisation is perhaps antiquated, but her application of historical corollary is successful. As M.J. Crossley Evans argues, the ideology of the *Strictures* stipulates that “history should show man’s corruption, his inability to save himself and his need for Christ’s redeeming love.”⁶⁵ Hence, More gives historical examples as evidence of the evils in a corrupt and ill-mannered society in order to furnish her arguments with even more saliency and present religious models for banishing corruption.

According to More, all women should be the crucial promoters of this moral responsibility, but they should not be taken out of their intended place, the domestic sphere. Indeed, Sutherland claims that More “draws polemical strength from a strict reinforcement of an orthodox female construction: woman in the home and not the workplace.”⁶⁶ Truly, More has no intention of altering the existing patriarchal customs. Her plan is to keep the structure of society in its present condition and develop the moral, social, and domestic temperaments of the nation’s women because the “state of civilized society depends...on the prevailing sentiments and habits of

⁶⁴ Hannah More, *The Works of Hannah More*, vol. 3 (London: H. Fisher and P. Jackson, 1834), 59.

⁶⁵ M.J. Crossley Evans, “The English Evangelicals and the Enlightenment: the case of Hannah More,” *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 303 (1992): 460.

⁶⁶ Sutherland, 40.

women, and on the nature and degree of the estimation in which they are held”(Vol.1, 2). Therefore, More maintains that the best place for women is in the home. As Harriet Guest argues, women, in More’s opinion, must embrace “the confinement of their different presence within the ‘smaller circle’ of domesticity.”⁶⁷ More even defines women’s view of life from a domestic perspective, “from a little elevation in her own garden whence she makes an exact survey of home scenes”(Vol. 2, 26). Of course, family and marriage are also essential. Davidoff and Hall assert that in the eighteenth-century family “must always come first, while within that family the demands of individual spiritual life had somehow to be balanced with the responsibilities of motherhood.”⁶⁸

More emphasises that a woman belongs within the domestic sphere because that is where she believes her to be the most religiously effective. Indeed, More believes that “[w]omen are also from their domestic habits, in possession of more leisure and tranquillity for religious pursuits”(Vol.2, 36). Accordingly, under More’s model, virtue can be gained from raising a family and managing the home. Jane Rendall declares that “[w]omen’s role then, as defined by evangelicalism, combined a central domestic focus with a high evaluation of women’s moral worth, of their positive and unique qualities, and their mission in the world.”⁶⁹

Therefore, the cultivation of society’s moral leaders requires the mindful education of women. More rhetorically asks, “should we not carefully cultivate intellect, implant religion, and cherish modesty?”(Vol.1, 76). The title of More’s work, in particular the word “strictures,” indicates that her suggestions may be

⁶⁷ Harriet Guest, “The dream of a common language: Hannah More and Mary Wollstonecraft,” *Textual Practice* 9, no.2 (1995): 319.

⁶⁸ Davidoff and Hall, 116.

⁶⁹ Jane Rendall, *The Origins of Modern Feminism: Women in Britain, France and the United States, 1780–1860* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1985), 106.

principles which will restrict in some way the conduct of females. Her evangelical convictions, which she fervently upheld at the time of publication, reveal that her view of education may be somewhat distinct in its religious focus. "For education," she defines, "is but an initiation into that life of trial to which we are introduced on our entrance into this world"(Vol.1, 170).

According to More, an important element of women's education is eliminating novels, "for frivolous reading will produce its correspondent effect, in much less time than books of solid instruction"(Vol.1, 172). Like Wollstonecraft, More believes that much of readers' perceptions of women unfortunately come from the works of Rousseau. Rousseau "does not paint an innocent woman, ruined, repenting, and restored; but with a far more mischievous refinement, he annihilates the value of chastity, and with pernicious subtlety attempts to make his heroine appear almost more amiable without it"(Vol.1, 32-33). Moreover, More stipulates that men and women should read particular literatures specifically intended for their sex. As Paul Keen sees it, "[r]ather than suggesting that literature ought to be the prerogative of men, More argued that different types of literature were best adapted to each sex."⁷⁰ To advance his point, it can be argued that More subtly chooses to uphold a separate female sphere, rather than create a subordinate one.

It is clear that More wishes to keep women within safe gender boundaries, and sees the status of eighteenth-century women held firmly in place by divine authority. Even taking into consideration the elements of More's work that seem to rally for advancement, the *Strictures* are still mostly religious proclamations. However, this religious focus, rather unintentionally, helps express More's feminist leanings. She takes a conservative feminist stance as she shields women from the vices of society by

⁷⁰ Paul Keen, *The Crisis of Literature in the 1790s: Print Culture and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 179.

defining their more active, central role as a religious, domestic duty. As Ross contends, “[w]hat More passes down to her feminine descendants, then, is both a blessing and a curse: she provides them with a protected horizon from which they can record women’s own desire, but that horizon itself is an opportunity defined by its limits.”⁷¹

However, More’s promotion of gender differences is perhaps problematic from a feminist perspective. Linda H. Peterson argues that “More’s educational philosophy insisted that women spend their time reading male authors rather than becoming authors themselves. More important, More’s views of women’s intellectual and imaginative capacities were inhibiting to female writers.”⁷² Peterson suggests that More adopted this position because she “believed in women’s natural inferiority.”⁷³ I believe it is more accurate to state that, at least within the *Strictures*, More upholds a theory of women’s natural differences rather than “natural inferiority.”

More has also been criticised as a hypocrite because her works endorsed one way of life for women while she led a different lifestyle. Katherine M. Rogers has argued that More, “seeing that she had no domestic obligations to meet,...could lead an independent and public existence while insisting that woman’s proper place was at home looking after her family.”⁷⁴ More did proclaim the virtue and necessity of marriage, children, and a domestic, pious existence within the *Strictures*, although she was an avowedly single woman who used the public domain of literature as a way to express her ideas for social improvement and to accrue wealth. Indeed, More strongly

⁷¹ Ross, 231.

⁷² Linda H. Peterson, “Becoming an Author: Mary Robinson’s Memoirs and the Origins of the Woman Artist’s Autobiography,” in *Re-Visioning Romanticism: British Women Writers, 1776–1837*, eds. Carol Shiner Wilson and Joel Haefner (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 46.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Katharine M. Rogers, *Feminism in Eighteenth-Century England* (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1982), 34.

believed in the principles of her *Strictures*, even if her own life did not follow her endorsed domestic path.

The *Strictures* and *Vindication*: Locating Similarities, Finding Feminism

Certainly, Wollstonecraft's political disquisition and More's religious manifesto are predicated on very different ideologies. Wollstonecraft has been seen as a progressive polemicist whose aim is not only to challenge male members of the society, but also to claim public rights for women. She presents a more politicised version of female advancement and sexual equality than her contemporary More. More resists Wollstonecraft's type of social modification, preferring a less public approach to change. More is a "conservative" feminist who wants to endow women's confined domestic role with more agency and importance.

Kathryn Sutherland believes More's endorsement of separate gender roles imparts her argument with more force and chance for success *because* it stipulates the maintenance of gender differences. "[I]f we are looking to the 1790s for the emergence of a nineteenth-century women's literary tradition, a stronger contender for its founding mother may be the 'right-aligned' Hannah More than the 'left-aligned' Mary Wollstonecraft....More builds upon and even exaggerates customary male/female distinctions. She inaugurates a counter-revolutionary female tradition."⁷⁵ Instead of altering societal norms significantly, as in the case of Wollstonecraft, More argues "a whole battery of women-directed discourses"⁷⁶ which are further focused in their aim because they more personally aid female improvement.

However, beyond this categorisation of the works as ideologically distinct, it is important to consider the analogous elements within the *Vindication* and the

⁷⁵ Kathryn Sutherland, "Hannah More's counter-revolutionary feminism," in *Revolution in Writing: British Literary Responses to the French Revolution*, ed. Kelvin Everest (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1991), 33.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 36.

Strictures in order to establish a clearer understanding of the social and cultural climate in which Romantic women poets operated. Given the context of late eighteenth-century thought, the facts that both More and Wollstonecraft were advocating improvement, and more specifically, were publishing extensive tracts through which to disseminate their ideas to a wider audience, are significant factors uniting them. In their use of the polemical tract, they share a common genre. Both women attempt to illustrate the advances society must make if women are to be contributors in British culture. Indeed, as Myers remarks, “[e]ach preceptor in her own way is a reformer who works to extend female agency through the moral revision of conventions.”⁷⁷

In their different polemical tracts, More and Wollstonecraft at times present strikingly comparable arguments. This alignment is evident in their thoughts on feeling and sensibility. Adela Pinch argues that “Hannah More, like many others, warned that a sensibility that opened one up to strong feeling was highly dangerous to a woman’s virtue; Mary Wollstonecraft argued that women had been made ‘slaves’ of their senses and their passions...and plunged into a wide variety of meannesses, cares, and sorrows.”⁷⁸ Wollstonecraft and More agree that women are susceptible to intense feelings and that a regulated sensibility is crucial if women are to appear refined, in control, and virtuous. They concur that controlled sensibilities can benefit women. For instance, Wollstonecraft believes that one’s reason is empowered by the rationalisation of one’s feelings. Wollstonecraft wants women to reclaim sensibility’s potential by allowing reason and sensibility to work together. Women should abandon the male construction of frivolous sensibility, and adopt a model of the feminine which embraces both rationality and controlled emotion. More accepts that

⁷⁷ Myers, 205.

⁷⁸ Pinch, 2.

sensibility can be useful, as well. When under divine control, sensibility encourages philanthropy. It is the moral aspect of sensibility that gives it potential for women's social improvement. If feeling has a moral import, More believes, then controlled sensibility is aligned with the more rational. In both cases, sensibility and rationality are aligned even if the way that the two are linked differs. In the revised cultures that More and Wollstonecraft envision, feeling remains a chief instrument of societal improvement, feminisation, and the acceptance of women. Indeed, both women share an interest in the power of sensibility.

In some examinations, the female protagonists of literary works have been regarded as support for "a new cultural mythology" which engages "visions of domestically grounded heroism" in "response to changing cultural values" which speak to conservatives and radicals alike.⁷⁹ Whether it is wise to describe this advancement in terms of fantasy is questionable, but what is important to the discussion here is the centrality of domesticity in literary works which indeed echoed the significance of the domestic sphere to the developing British culture.

Wollstonecraft believes that marriage and motherhood supply essential "feminine" elements in the culture. While in agreement that domestic practices can be a female advantage because they are a necessity for societal improvement, More locates greater importance in the domestic as it is defined as the rightful sphere for women. It is evident that both authors acknowledge the usefulness of the domestic in bringing women to the attention of society. In this way, Wollstonecraft and More share a commitment to a more conservative form of feminism which still relies on women's accepted roles.

⁷⁹ Mitzi Myers, "Hannah More's Tracts for the Times Social Fiction and Female Ideology," in *fetter'd or free?: British Women Novelists, 1670-1815*, eds. Mary Anne Schofield and Cecilia Macheski (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1986), 277, where she refers to the work of John G. Cawelti.

Certainly, for More, the domestic is crucial as a potential site of additional religious growth, and most of her arguments within the *Strictures* are steeped in religious justification. Although much criticism has overlooked the importance of Wollstonecraft's religious beliefs to her polemical ideas, she does not abandon religion within her *Vindication*. Barbara Taylor has recently argued that by ignoring religious influence, scholars have lost sight of the work's "utopian thrust: that unwavering faith in divine purpose that, suffusing her radicalism, turned anticipations of 'world perfected' into a confident political stance."⁸⁰ Yet within Wollstonecraft's work, religion is a subtle tool for communicating her argument for the equality of men and women. The following passage which discusses human development, for example, registers a religious tone: "the understanding, as life advances, gives firmness to the first fair purposes of sensibility—till virtue, arising rather from the clear conviction of reason than the impulse of the heart, morality is made to rest on a rock against which the storms of passion vainly beat"(114). It is not until the following line that Wollstonecraft makes her reference to Dissenting beliefs clear: "I hope I shall not be misunderstood when I say, that religion will not have this condensing energy, unless it be founded on reason"(114). Both writers, then, rhetorically use theistic examples to support their claims for women's advancement.

Another common bond is that both women object to Rousseau within their polemical works. More objects to the way that he portrays women as provocative, less-pure creatures and thus rejects his work. Likewise, Wollstonecraft finds Rousseau's views of women to be remonstrative: "Rousseau declares that a woman should never, for a moment, feel herself independent, that she should be governed by fear to exercise her natural cunning, and made a coquetish slave in order to render her

⁸⁰ Taylor, *Feminist Imagination*, 4.

a more alluring object of desire, a sweeter companion to man, whenever he chooses to relax himself”(25). Although Wollstonecraft does not embrace these particular views, she does see her work as an extension of some of Rousseau’s arguments. For example, she revises his position on the exercise of reason: “In fact, it is a farce to call any being virtuous whose virtues do not result from the exercise of its own reason. This was Rousseau’s opinion respecting men: I extend it to women”(21). While More’s conservative feminism calls for her to dismiss the works of Rousseau outright, Wollstonecraft’s feminism can reject Rousseau by offering her disquisition as a corrected, improved, and more comprehensive societal model.

Of course, what remains at the core of both women’s texts is a feminisation of the existing culture. As Myers reminds us, “[m]oral reform, then, was the complex issue of the day, and it was pre-eminently a female issue, witnessing the dialectic through which women, enmeshed in ideologies, use cultural definitions to try to shape their own lives, partly complying with and partly taking charge of their destinies.”⁸¹ More envisages a society which holds women at its moral centre; a culture which asks women to disseminate morality through its ranks; a community which allows women to be better wives, mothers, and Christians; and a world which, in its acknowledgement of social and political differences, values gender differences, and embraces femininity. Similarly emphasising the feminine, Wollstonecraft radically demands access to the public sphere and education; a strengthening of domesticity and the feminine alongside the eradication of frivolous behaviours; the symbiosis of sensibility and reason; and the cessation of equating sexual differences with gender inequality.

⁸¹ Myers, “Reform or Ruin,” 211.

It is essential to bear in mind that both women challenge contemporary notions of female behaviour and participate, through their writings, in the cultural activity of the late-eighteenth century. A woman's influential and confident presence in literature which discusses the condition of women in society "both testifies to female agency and ratifies woman's socially functional centrality."⁸² Clearly, the different ideologies used to convey dissatisfaction with the existing culture are not the most important components of this analysis. These works highlight the variety of cultural criticism, the presence of feminine polemic, and the diversity of the literary culture in the late-eighteenth century. In their individual ways, these women writers share the common goal of societal improvement through an emphasis on women, and in the process, confirm the diversity of the Romantic literary culture.

Moreover, their polemics both testify to the complexity of feminism in the Romantic period. The advocacy of women's rights in the eighteenth-century was a discourse which built connections between what seemed to be huge political differences. One female intellectual of More's and Wollstonecraft's time, Mary Berry, wrote, "I have been able...to go entirely through Hannah More, and Mrs Woolstonecraft [sic] immediately after her. It is amazing, but impossible, they should do otherwise than agree on all the great points of female education. H. More will, I dare say, be very angry when she hears this, though I would lay wager that she never read the book."⁸³ Because More and Wollstonecraft embraced different religious and political ideologies, perhaps they would have objected to the suggestion that they are in many ways similar. However, the similarities that Berry and myself find suggests that feminism in the eighteenth century allowed for intersections between conservative and radical thought.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Mary Berry, quoted in Harriet Guest, "The dream of a common language: Hannah More and Mary Wollstonecraft," *Textual Practice* 9, no. 2 (1995): 305.

The final section of this chapter suggests directions for examining women's Romantic poetry as diverse responses to the shifting culture in light of this political complexity. Women's literary investments in the period were numerous and confirm that women used the written word as their medium for expression. Several previous studies of Romantic literature, specified below, have expanded our knowledge of literary activity and emphasised the significance of a variety of works. Yet these studies often rely on existing definitions of Romanticism or highlight male literary achievements. I place my work alongside this criticism by arguing that women's Romantic poetry should be analysed apart from the historical and literary specifications of Romanticism that serve to elucidate male experience in the period. Therefore, the remainder of this chapter lays the foundations of my study and outlines the themes and issues examined within each chapter in order to provide a solid basis for the subsequent analyses of women's poetry.

WOMEN'S POETRY OF THE ROMANTIC PERIOD

Women's Participation in the Literary Culture

During the Romantic period, the feminisation of culture allowed for the increasing presence of women in the public sphere. The ideal of the domestic and "feminine" could still be upheld by women who desired to partake in the developing print culture. Women writing publicly—whether in pamphlets, journals, poetic collections, novels, or tracts—blurred the boundaries of the public and private. In essence, the written words of literary women could perform the public acts of speech that were so often denied to women.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ See Davidoff and Hall, 146.

Over the eighteenth century, the number of women participating in the print culture increased exponentially. Judith Phillips Stanton's study of the increase in the number of women writers between 1660 and 1800 proves that women picked up their pens with great frequency. Stanton's findings show that the escalation in the number of women writers during these centuries surpassed the population growth of Britain at the time. "The overall population was increasing at a rate of 20 percent during the first half of the century and at an astonishing 50 percent during the second half....The rate at which women took up the pen, however, far outstripped the population growth rate. Their numbers increased at around 50 percent *every decade* starting in the 1760s."⁸⁵ Not surprisingly, for these women writers, the most popular genre was poetry. Of the 913 women Stanton discovers in her reading of numerous volumes and collections, 263, or roughly 29 percent, wrote poetry. After all of the prior attempts of women writers to join the literary culture, it seems as if women "had found a voice" in poetry.⁸⁶ Stanton extends her findings to hypothesise that it is conceivably accurate that "women started to write at a greater rate than men during this time."⁸⁷

By participating in the literary culture in such great numbers, women were claiming room for themselves in the literary space. Crucially, as Cheryl Turner has argued, "[t]he conversion of both sexes to an acceptance, even approval, of female authors, which was a prerequisite for women's greater participation in the literature market, was indeed carried forward during the eighteenth-century."⁸⁸ New ways of expressing personal beliefs, as well as the emotional force with which women wrote about their culture and their lives, gave unique potency to women's literature and

⁸⁵ Judith Phillips Stanton, "Statistical Profile of Women Writing in English from 1660–1800," in *Eighteenth-Century Women and the Arts*, eds. Frederick M. Keener and Susan E. Lorsch (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 248.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 250.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 253.

⁸⁸ Cheryl Turner, *Living By the Pen: Women Writers in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 1992), 130.

challenged common assumptions about the culture which had previously been characterised by their male peers. Literary women were, as Germaine Greer describes them, “women who took themselves seriously, who risked ridicule, exploitation and calumny because they thought they had something to say.”⁸⁹

Examining the Methodologies of Previous Criticism

Traditionally, the Romantic period encompasses the years from the commencement of the French Revolution in 1789 to the passage of the Reform Bill and the emergence of the Victorian era circa 1832. It is necessary to recover Romantic women writers from these social and historical contexts that have previously succeeded in highlighting contemporaneous male authors. By not using dates to define the period of Romantic women’s writing, these boundaries are necessarily challenged. Additionally, criticism to date has focused on women writers predominantly in relation to their male peers. Numerous studies of the literary Romantic period have emphasised the class struggles, economic concerns, and political views of the Britons of these decades. Some of these earlier studies, such as the widely-read *Beyond Romanticism*, *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism*, and *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries* attend primarily to the societal shifts which influenced citizens daily.⁹⁰ While these publications analyse the literature produced during this period and examine the literary culture, it must be noted that their chief responsibilities lie in discussing the impact of the Romantic

⁸⁹ Germaine Greer, *Slip-Shod Sibyls: Recognition, Rejection and the Woman Poet* (London: Viking, 1995), xxiii.

⁹⁰ Stephen Copley and John Whale, eds., *Beyond Romanticism: New Approaches to Texts and Contexts 1780–1832* (London: Routledge, 1992); Stuart Curran, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries: English Literature and its Background 1760–1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).

period in connection with the six canonical male poets, Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley, Keats, Coleridge, and Blake.

Several of the currently-acknowledged literary conventions of (male) Romanticism include: an emphasis on “innovation” as opposed to “traditionalism;” “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings;” nature and the sublime; an identification of “the protagonists with the poets themselves;” and a “limitless aspiration toward the infinite good envisioned by the faculty of imagination.”⁹¹ On the whole, these practices do not provide the accurate means by which to analyse women’s literary contributions of the period; nor do these distinctions provide adequate appreciation of the work of women writers given that women’s circumstances differed from their male counterparts’ situations in several crucial respects. While the salient role of male writers should be acknowledged, the current understanding of British Romanticism can only go so far to assist critics in analysing women’s voices within this momentous era of British literary achievement; and these foundations must be refocused to examine women writers.

Certainly, it is useful to discuss female authors as a distinct cohort. The gendered stereotypes and expectations deposited on women during this period segregated them from their male counterparts in significant ways, requiring studies of women’s literary achievements to be scrutinised in this manner. As I have argued, the Romantic period saw a change in the literary culture as literature and the society became more feminised. It was at this crucial period of literary growth when women were developing their literary identities and were legitimated in exploring “feminine” qualities within their writing. An investigation of women’s contributions to the literary culture is vital if one is to grasp a true understanding of British

⁹¹ M.H.Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 6th ed. (London: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1993), 127–29.

Romanticism and understand women's responses to such a tumultuous society.

Examinations such as *A Feminist Introduction to Romanticism*, *Feminism in Eighteenth-Century England*, and *Women and Literature in Britain*, for example, recognise that women writers inaugurated their careers from a position of inferiority and disadvantage.⁹² During the Romantic period, social roles were mainly defined by gender differences. The endeavour to participate in the literary culture, the challenge to combat gender stereotypes and limitations, and the continuing charge to voice their observations and opinions encapsulate the struggles of female authors. Hence, it is crucial to appraise female writers as a group in and of themselves outside of discussions of their male contemporaries.

Cheryl Turner, author of *Living By the Pen*, adopts a similar methodology to the one I suggest. "Women are considered as a group," she remarks in her work, "because their sex had a profound influence upon their place within the patriarchal power struggles of eighteenth-century society. Their behaviour was guided, judged, and controlled by contemporary notions of femininity and this affected not only what they wrote but why and how they put pen to paper."⁹³ Even though Turner's system by which women authors should be grouped is sensible and advisable, I develop her idea one step further by analysing specifically the female *poets* of the day as a particular body of writers. *Romanticism and Women Poets*, edited by Harriet Kramer Linkin and Stephen C. Behrendt, also applies this strategy. The editors declare that their "collection is the first to look exclusively at the *poetry* produced by women writers in the Romantic era."⁹⁴ Adopting the "central issue of reception and

⁹² See Elizabeth A. Fay, *A Feminist Introduction to Romanticism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1998); Katharine M. Rogers, *Feminism in Eighteenth-Century England* (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1982); Vivien Jones, ed., *Women and Literature in Britain 1700–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁹³ Turner, 3.

⁹⁴ Harriet Kramer Linkin and Stephen C. Behrendt, introduction to *Romanticism and Women Poets: Opening the Doors of Reception*, ed. Linkin and Behrendt (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999), 5.

reputation” in each of its essays, their study presents a distinct focus on women poets’ place in Romanticism, the ways in which women poets stabilised themselves in the literary culture, and the reputations of women writers in their time.⁹⁵

To some critics, women writers of this period are seen as inaugurating a form of Romanticism all their own—what has previously been called “feminine Romanticism.” In her informative book *Romanticism and Gender*, published in 1993, Anne Mellor defined “feminine Romanticism” as an ideology in which “moral reform both of the individual and of the family-politic is achieved, not by utopian imaginative vision, but by the communal exercise of reason, moderation, tolerance and the domestic affections.”⁹⁶ In other words, the common efforts of women permitted them to claim reason, domesticity, and feeling as their prerogative to acceptance and still retain their individual subjectivity. By 1995, Mellor defined “feminine Romanticism” as a “‘spirit of the age,’ a set of personal, political, and literary investments, collectively shared by the leading women writers of the period.”⁹⁷ Unified, women could share their “feminine” subjectivities through one common literary means. Mellor considered this conglomeration as representative of a certain type of Romanticism for women and retained her focus on the “feminine.” But by 2003, Mellor had exchanged the term “feminine Romanticism” in favour of “ethic of care.” Still focused on women’s writings, she now finds that a resistance of the political ideologies of the Revolution, the formation of community, and a commitment to the genre of the novel rather than the poem to be significant features of the “ethic of care” ideology.⁹⁸ These adjustments in Mellor’s categorisation of “feminine Romanticism”

⁹⁵ Ibid., 6.

⁹⁶ Anne K. Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* (London: Routledge, 1993), 209.

⁹⁷ Anne K. Mellor, “A Criticism of Their Own: Romantic Women Literary Critics,” in *Questioning Romanticism*, ed., John Beer (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 30.

⁹⁸ Anne K. Mellor, “The State of the Art” (paper presented at the Mellon Foundation Interpretive Seminar in the Humanities “The 1790s: British Culture in a Revolutionary Decade,” Pasadena, California, 4 September 2003).

and her shift to the questionable “ethic of care” ideology show that trying to define women’s writings as a separate branch of the Romantic literary canon is problematic. It is clear, from her oversight of poetry’s significance and her choice to separate women by placing them within too traditional a space, that Mellor misreads the intrinsic problems in analysing women’s Romantic literature.

I avoid terms such as “feminine Romanticism,” “female Romanticism,” and especially “ethic of care” in my examination of women’s poetry of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries in Britain. Although I examine women’s poetry apart from the literary contributions of men in the period, I still believe that it is important to keep the canon of “Romantic literature” intact by not signifying women’s poetical achievements as works of “feminine Romanticism.” Instead, in characterising my dissertation as a study that looks at “women’s Romantic poetry,” the connection of women to the literary community maintains its significance and encourages the extension of the canon of Romanticism to include these important women writers. However, many studies often rely on close analyses of novels and comparisons of women’s writings with the works of the canonical male writers. As signified above, I wish to recover women’s poetry from the traditions common to Romanticism as defined through men’s literary achievements. This investigation acknowledges the approaches suggested by the critics above, yet offers a more nuanced assessment of female poets of the Romantic period in Britain.

Sensibility, Community, Abolition: Developing Diversity

By taking a new, critical angle on women’s poetic contributions to the Romantic canon, this dissertation contributes to existing secondary literature. The development of a more informed account of late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-

century women poets' articulations of their responses to the shifting culture is vital to improve our understanding of Romantic literature. In order to determine a focus for literary criticism, this investigation examines the way in which women poets presented themselves as cultural critics through textual constructions of the issues that were of great concern and importance to them: sensibility, community, and abolition.

In my work, I trace the development of women's Romantic poetry and define what I see as its emphasis on feeling, social community, and diversity. I focus on the topics of sensibility, community, and abolition, with diversity serving as an overarching theme. The second chapter looks at sensibility as a literary tool used by Romantic women poets to bridge the public and private spheres. The third chapter traces the development of community to discover the ways in which different constructions of community helped women poets to participate in the literary culture and comment on social shifts. The final chapter analyses abolitionist verse as a case study to demonstrate how the different poets used images of community and expressions of sensibility in diverse ways.

The second chapter on sensibility is bold in its aim. In their poems on sensibility, which I argue should be considered a new genre, women writers presented a more personalised view of the emotion which was deemed important to femininity, yet served to break down the division of the public and private spheres. Sensibility is not a new concept to the study of Romanticism. However, its importance as a literary device, and what I independently call the genre of the "Address to Sensibility," must be re-evaluated in order to contribute to our general understanding of the concept in terms of women's Romantic poetry. If literature was considered women's access to the public sphere, then sensibility served as their currency in the literary culture. Their use of sensibility can also be considered one of the most important points of

cultural feminisation. Female poets used sensibility as a way to join the literary culture and present a representative figure of the woman writer in British Romantic-period culture. Indeed, women found the written word to be a considerable channel for personal expression. This personalisation of literary production became part of the ideology in which female poets operated and which helped them to negotiate their entrance into the literary culture.

Naturally, a chapter examining women poets' connections with the literary culture is vital to a greater understanding of the significance of their literary achievements. The third chapter on social, intellectual, literary, and critical community shows that in order to claim acceptance within the literary culture, women poets maintained diversity by supporting individuality while building commonality in the literary space. Indeed, their responses to becoming members of the literary culture are important markers of not just their successes as writers but their struggles as women to improve and perhaps feminise the culture. Their engagements with the literary community certainly marked a penetration of the public sphere.

In the final chapter, abolitionist poetry is considered a type of case study of the themes of sensibility, community, and diversity. Women poets define their intervention into the politics of the abolition movement through expressions of sensibility and explorations of various forms of community. Moreover, women's poetic pleas for abolition parallel petitions to ameliorate the social baseness of British society. Women poets often used representations of British culture and arguments for diversity in their pleas for abolition. Within their abolitionist poems, echoes of sensibility, community, and diversity can distinctly be located.

Diversity is a main component of this study, yet is not explored in a separate chapter. Diversity enhances the understanding of sensibility, community, abolition,

and indeed the traditions of women's poetry itself. Unlike difference which enforces segregation and opposition, diversity calls for difference amidst commonality.

Women writers do not wish to remain separate from their male counterparts in a distinct literary community based on gender. Rather, they wish to become members of the literary culture alongside male writers. If this goal is to be realised, they must emphasise diversity rather than argue for difference, which would merely serve to undermine their position. Furthermore, sensibility acts as a force which allows female writers to remain feminine, yet promote a more public persona. Women poets often merge masculine and feminine within their poetic works and it is this amalgamation which promotes diversity. If masculine and feminine traits can be successfully expressed in writing, then men and women can share the public and literary worlds. Diversity can, of course, most plainly be seen in women's poetic petitions on behalf of Africans in the fight to end the slave trade in Britain. By definition, abolition carries with it a charge to end social injustice based on difference. Women's abolitionist poems call for social change by promoting diversity. Truly, when diversity is used as an ideology by women writers, their use of sensibility, their calls for inclusion in the literary culture, and their desires to improve and feminise the society have greater chances for success and make their polemical appeals feasible.

In following these themes, this analysis also elucidates more particular leitmotifs: how female poets challenged contemporary notions of femininity and proper female behaviour, utilised their gift of the freedom of heightened feeling and expression in economised and politicised terms, expressed feminist sentiments by calling for societal change, equated the use of feeling and sensibility with the ability to reason, and formed communities of intellect to ensure their literary and private

lives were united. These arguments for feminisation and diversification ultimately justify a re-evaluation of Romanticism to include more women poets.

Several criteria had to be fulfilled in choosing poems. First, an overall discussion of the themes essential within the dissertation had to be inherent in the poems. Analysing the specific themes of sensibility, community, and abolition concentrates the survey of the complexities of the literary culture and highlights the diversity of women's Romantic verse. Second, a central representation of the self as a woman and a writer had to allow for a reading of the work in the particular terms of female experience and feeling in the literary culture. The most interesting developments of the diverse literary landscape can be traced by situating these analyses in the cultural issues of the day as it relates to women's experience. Third, it was also a matter of personal selection which led to the inclusion or exclusion of some poems. While these criteria necessarily limit the scope of this investigation, my selections ensure that the most relevant and engaging poems are discussed. I believe that I have chosen the best and most significant poems to elucidate the themes explored in my examination of women's Romantic poetry.

Besides, every female poet of the period could not be included in this finite enquiry. For the purposes of this study of women's poetry, it is not vitally important to elucidate the particular political distinctions of each female poet because, for example, this study does not solely compare and contrast poems on the French Revolution. That type of monographic study would necessarily require an in-depth analysis of a poet's political convictions and would assume the development about a specific political argument about a particular historical moment. However, as one's background is an important factor in developing one's personal convictions, at certain points some references to the authors' lives will be necessary to place them in relation

to other women poets of the Romantic period. As mentioned previously, I also endeavour to introduce lesser-known women poets into the canon of Romantic literature by analysing their poetry within this dissertation. Brief background information about some of the featured writers will be provided to indicate the diversity of the Romantic literary culture.

Indeed, the selections of poets and their works were made with a purposeful and discerning eye. This dissertation investigates selected British Romantic female poets whose works exemplify their struggles as cultural critics and their responses to the changing British society. An emphasis on diversity, the amalgamation of masculine and feminine, a sense of individuality even in the search for commonality, and the desire to improve the culture through feminisation are indeed important issues in women's poetry of the Romantic period and will be noted within subsequent chapters which discuss the larger themes of sensibility, community, and abolition.

2

THE “ADDRESS TO SENSIBILITY:” EXAMINING A NEW GENRE OF WOMEN’S ROMANTIC POETRY

By the 1760s, Frances Greville’s “A Prayer for Indifference”(1759) had been distributed among several authors and had captured critical interest.¹ In this work, Greville calls for a nymph to impart the gift of indifference upon her in order to relieve her deep, intense feelings. Her poem expresses the implications of eschewing sensibility. Although Greville’s spiritual tone warrants a reverential consideration of her argument, her intent is not to exalt sensibility, but to do away with heightened emotion. Her poem is strikingly different from the new genre of the “Address to Sensibility” that would become prevalent in the Romantic period. Indeed, two decades later, women poets re-engaged with sensibility and explored its influences within their poems. By this time, sensibility compelled them and provided them with the necessary means to express themselves within their literary works and to reach a public audience. Greville’s poem is examined as a way of illustrating this shift.

In the opening stanza, Greville states the personal and spiritual aspects of her argument:

¹ Frances Greville, “A Prayer for Indifference,” in *Poems Selected and Printed by a Small Party of English, who made this amusement a substitute for society, which the disturbed situation of the country prevented their enjoying* (Strasburg, 1792), 51–53.

Oft I've implor'd the gods in vain
And prayed till I've been weary;
For once I'll try my wish to gain,
Of Oberon the Fairy.

(1-4)

She implores the nymph to exercise his powers to manipulate nature and create a healing "balm"(16) for her from an "herb or tree"(14). Unlike the love-sick humans that Oberon encounters within William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Greville does not desire "kind return in love"(17) or "tempting charm to please"(18). On the contrary, she yearns for no emotion at all.

Indeed, Greville wants all feeling to be removed from her heart as emotion causes her too much discomfort and anguish:

Nor ease nor peace that heart can know,
Which, like the needle true,
Turns at the touch of joy or woe,
But, turning, trembles too.

Far as distress the soul can wound,
'Tis pain in each degree:
'Tis bliss but to a certain bound;
Beyond, is agony.

(21-28)

Greville highlights the capricious disposition of sensibility when she states that it can quickly turn from "joy or woe," causing one's senses to quiver disturbingly. Greville is not in awe of this tremendous human power that switches emotions so rapidly. Rather, she finds this ability distressing as it causes "pain in each degree" of feeling. Therefore, she wishes for Oberon to remove her sensibility, her "treacherous sense"(29) as she regards it, and replace it with "Indifference"(36).

Indifference, the lack of any discernible interest or sentiment, is preferable to heightened emotion, according to Greville. Moreover, not only does she desire all emotion to leave her, but she also wants the physical materialisation of feeling to cease:

The tear, which pity taught to flow,
My eye shall then disown;
The heart that melts for others woe,
Shall then scarce feel its own.

(41–44)

Greville wishes for all of the properties of sensibility—the feelings and the physical responses to those intense emotions—to be absent from her life. Greville also connects her private sensibility with public influence. In the first instance, she implies that she has learned how to react to her sensibility when she states that she has been “taught” to cry. She also responds to “others woe” by sympathetically feeling their sorrows within her own heart. Greville describes herself as a victim of society’s encouragement for all to possess and cultivate sensibility. Essentially, Greville believes that her feelings have been heightened through social influence. Therefore, indifference will allow her to transcend this societal pressure.

Consequently, the escape from sensibility permits an escape from society. At the end of the poem she states that indifference will take her “To some new region of delight, / Unknown to mortal tread”(55–56). She will drink “heaven’s ambrosial dew”(58) and retreat somewhere to pass her life in “sober ease; / Half-pleas’d”(62–63). Whereas sensibility is communally experienced, indifference is solitary. In Greville’s model, indifference is not merely the lack of caring and concern; it is also the isolation from others in a place she imagines as immortal and heavenly.

As she regards society as the agitator of her distressing emotions, Greville desires to live her life alone in an emotionless state. However, her poem prevails, quite contrary to her argument, in conveying the utility of intense feeling and community. As she prays for a natural reprieve, she defines herself through intense emotions. She cannot avoid using heightened feelings to characterise herself or to implore the fairy to grant her indifference. Furthermore, she is truly aware of the

impact of feeling on her life, which is perhaps symptomatic of her inherent sensibility. She needs emotion and she desires to communicate to others. In fact, even her public plea to the nymph thwarts her goal to remain reclusive and emotionless. Greville's published poem, which stands as her lasting connection with the literary culture and with the culture of sensibility, ultimately prevents her from breaking free from sensibility's powerful hold.

By the 1780s, solitude and escape from sensibility no longer appealed to women writers. Female poets of the Romantic period did not abandon sensibility precisely because of its capacity for emotion and its potential for social influence. Rather, they employed sensibility in order to connect their private lives and literary productions with the community. In contrast to Greville, Romantic women writers embraced and explored the potential of sensibility within their poems. In this chapter, I argue that while literature bridged the gap between the public and private, sensibility was a crucial aspect of the currency between the two. Poets used sensibility as a public form of personal commentary and as a mode of social exchange. Through an examination of several poems which detail sensibility's notable elements, personal significance, and social power, I also argue that a specific poetic genre on sensibility existed in the period. These poems are grouped under the new genre of what I call the "Address to Sensibility." This particular genre most directly illuminates British women poets' understandings and uses of sensibility in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. These poems follow a loose formula which provides a definition of sensibility, traces its personal impact, and defines a link between the culture and heightened emotion. Within this genre, female poets attempt to locate commonality, yet assert their individual beliefs. Analyses of these poems enhance, clarify, and specify women's explorations of sensibility in the period. Therefore, several poems

in the style of the “Address to Sensibility” by Helen Maria Williams, Hannah More, Ann Yearsley, Frances Greensted, and Isabella Lickbarrow will be examined as a genre to explore the intricacies of the issue at hand.

Yet before declaring that women poets used their perceived accessibility to their feelings in a new style of Romantic poetry, it is important to grasp the complexities of sensibility and review the range of definitions of the term. The first section of this chapter examines the debates on feeling in the late eighteenth century and explores the permutations in discussions of sensibility. Many scholars have attested that Romantic writers, as they debated its usefulness and potential harm, engaged in a literary dialogue with sensibility. I explore sensibility’s relation with gender, public/private, economy, and reason in order to emphasise the complexity of women poets’ engagements with sensibility.

DEFINING SENSIBILITY

Sensibility, Sentiment, Sentimentalism

In recent years, sensibility has become a popular topic of critical debate. Janet Todd started the trend with her important work *Sensibility: An Introduction*. Since then, the discussion of sensibility has been enhanced by literary critics such as G.J. Barker-Benfield and Markman Ellis who explore the cultural and political applications of sensibility within their studies. These three distinct views help illuminate the complexities of the discussion and are critiqued below. My aim is to contribute to this developing argument by examining sensibility as it is expressed by women poets in the late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century genre of the “Address to Sensibility.”

Sensibility, at its most basic, is the expression of thoughts, beliefs, and morals through the utterance of feelings and the heightened awareness of emotion. Crucially, in this period and in these discussions, sensibility harbours the potential for feelings to be expressed openly, in a public arena or setting; it does not stipulate only a private expression of feelings, however deeply felt or personal. Sensibility was a powerful method by which authors expressed their diverse beliefs, opinions, and emotions.²

Several terms such as “sentiment,” “sentimentalism,” and “sensibility” are widely used in secondary analyses of Romantic literature. Janet Todd’s invaluable and seminal work, *Sensibility: An Introduction*, begins with an outline of the various terms that she believes deserve delineation.³ Todd places importance not on the peculiarities of a specific emotion, but on the power of feeling to affect others. Feeling, she argues, is the required element in any discussion of sensibility. The premise of her book rests on the belief that feeling establishes common ground between reader and writer. As she discusses the significance of sensibility to various sentimental works—she cites novels, poems, tracts, and even periodicals—its complexity becomes apparent.⁴ Her work is mainly descriptive, which allows for further interpretation of the importance of sensibility as it relates to eighteenth-century society and literature.

Todd begins with a definition of sentimentalism as it “denote[s] the movement discerned in philosophy, politics and art, based on the belief in or hope of the natural goodness of humanity and manifested in a humanitarian concern for the unfortunate

² Within this dissertation, the terms “feeling” and “emotion” are used coterminously in the interests of linguistic variety and clarity. An examination of “sensibility” adequately complicates and expands our understanding of “feeling” and “emotion” more than an investigation and differentiation of these latter terms themselves provides. “Feeling” is defined as the “condition of being emotionally affected” or “indicating emotion or sensibility;” “emotion” is defined as “any agitation or disturbance of mind, feeling, passion.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “feeling” and “emotion,” as used in the eighteenth century.

³ Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1986).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 4–5.

and helpless.”⁵ According to Todd, sentimentalism is a movement in eighteenth-century society that occupied philosophers, politicians, and artists alike. It crossed ideological boundaries and shed new light on the power of feelings. Todd does not rely on the terms “public” and “private” to elucidate these ideological transitions, but instead explains them with regard to their social impact. Sentimentalism was to refine the society and alleviate wrongs infringed upon its citizens. In this sense, it is central to cultural development. Todd elaborates on this potential for social change when she argues that “[s]entimentalism is associated with a variety of social and cultural phenomena: the shifting importance of various classes, the growth of London, the increase in publishing and literary activity in the provincial towns, the changing perception of the family and its importance within society, the economic and cultural situation of women, and the interrelated developments in religion, philosophy and science.”⁶

Central to the sentimentalism movement, of course, was the expression of sentiment. Todd defines sentiment as “a moral reflection, a rational opinion usually about the rights and wrongs of human conduct...also a thought, often an elevated one, influenced by emotion, a combining of heart with head or an emotional impulse leading to an opinion or a principle.”⁷ Therefore, sentimentalism is not merely ameliorative, it is the application of moral thoughts laden with emotion that will ultimately improve the lives of citizens; it is an active force for renewal. Additionally, it is also implied that the proper use of those feelings must be determined, for their improper use may have adverse effects within society.

According to Todd, a sentiment is an emotionally-driven, moralistic thought capable of improving society. Therefore, she defines sensibility as “the faculty of

⁵ Ibid., 7.

⁶ Ibid., 10.

⁷ Ibid., 7.

feeling, the capacity for extremely refined emotion and a quickness to display compassion for suffering.”⁸ As Todd defines it, sensibility is the antithesis of a sentiment. Whereas sentiment is the composition of a thought, sensibility is the actual feeling, the physical manifestations of a sentiment, the emotion come alive.

Todd’s thesis is problematic, therefore, because she eliminates the possible intersection of terms by depicting sentiment, sentimentalism, and sensibility as being essentially different. Under Todd’s reasoning, sensibility cannot change the culture because these feelings are not inherently moral reactions and politicised thoughts. Sensibility is simply an ability to feel intensely. Yet the use of sensibility as a means of political, social, and personal expression was common among female authors and is seen within their poetry. Therefore, Todd’s argument presents a dilemma for the scholar of eighteenth-century literature. Romantic women poets’ use of sensibility calls for literary critics to blend the terms that Todd problematically separates.

Critic G.J. Barker-Benfield takes the opposite approach. His solution to the problem of segregating sensibility, sentiment, and emotion is to call for a unifying definition. In *The Culture of Sensibility*, he argues that “a cult of feeling, a cult of melancholy, a cult of distress, a cult of refined emotionalism, a cult of benevolence, and a cult of individual writers...All may be grouped with the cult of sensibility.”⁹ His methodology attempts to classify all writers, especially women, under one definition. He also fails to indicate the importance of different forms of sensibility and the varying ways that women featured it within their writings. “The complaint most often leveled at Barker-Benfield’s book was that in consolidating the literature,

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ G.J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), xix.

philosophy, and moral discourses of the period he reduced its complexities to an all-embracing totality.”¹⁰

This dilemma is put to rest in Markman Ellis’s notable book *The Politics of Sensibility*. He convincingly argues that “it is not possible to legislate between the closely allied terms ‘sensibility’ and ‘sentimental’ in the mid eighteenth century, especially as they are used in the novels. However, though sensibility and sentimental may not be separated, that is not because they share a single unitary meaning, but rather, they amalgamate and mix freely a large number of varied discourses.”¹¹ Ellis argues that the terms should maintain their distinctness, but that an intermingling of concepts should be allowed within literary criticism because of the wide range of subjects and genres. He uses the terms “sentiment” and “sensibility” interchangeably, often preferring to designate “sentimentalism” as the overarching term throughout his work.

Although Ellis tends at times to focus on epistemological readings of the works he discusses, this yields a more interdisciplinary feel to his analysis. Although he gives examples of novels penned by women writers to expand his points, his emphasis is not on poetry or women’s experience, but the political. Also, Ellis finds in his examinations of sentimental novels that sensibility is “resistant to definition.”¹² However, his findings can be extended to cover women’s poetic writings.

My chapter contributes to the developing argument by exploring women’s various conceptions of sensibility in the Romantic period in the specific poetic genre of the “Address to Sensibility.” Indeed, my critical explorations and analyses help define the complexities of sensibility more clearly. To clarify, this investigation

¹⁰ Robert W. Jones, “Ruled Passions: Re-Reading the Culture of Sensibility,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 32, no. 3 (1999), 396.

¹¹ Markman Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility: Race, Gender and Commerce in the Sentimental Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 7–8.

¹² *Ibid.*, 5.

supports the method suggested by Ellis and warns against the type of analyses used by Todd and Barker-Benfield. These latter critics simplify the complexities of sentiment and sensibility. Todd attempts to avoid confusion by claiming that these terms should be considered separately; she overlooks any amalgamation. Yet arguing that all understandings of social feeling should be placed under one unifying definition of sensibility is also ill-advised; as such, Barker-Benfield's strategy should be read with caution. Barker-Benfield's narrow approach cannot successfully advance an argument that there are particularities and complexities of emotion which can enrich political debate, fuel societal change, or empower literary expression. Ellis provides the most useful clarification of the terms by maintaining their distinctness, yet suggesting their association. Although I agree that "sentiment" and "sensibility" have a multiplicity of meanings and uses within literary study, I regard them as collateral terms, parallel representations of emotions.

The Dual-Gendered Nature of Sensibility

In the Romantic period, sensibility was strongly implicated in notions of gender. In fact, as Ellis points out, it was commonly upheld that "[s]ensibility was a distinctly feminine field of knowledge, which, although available to both men and women, was particularly associated with the behaviour and experience of women and often apostrophised as a feminine figure."¹³ As I explored in chapter one, British culture became increasingly feminised in this period. The social acceptance of sensibility partly contributed to the cultural feminisation. To a considerable degree, sensibility also influenced changes in the literary culture. In accordance with the changing society, women poets used sensibility, which infused emotional influence

¹³ Ibid., 24.

into their works, to mediate the link established by literature between the public and private spheres. In order to achieve this aim, they presented sensibility, in part, as a dual-gendered concept. As such, sensibility served to bring the sexes together, connect the private and public, and create community. Where gender was concerned, sensibility was situated in a complex position between the public and private, masculine and feminine.

In his essay on the association of conversation and sensibility, "The Conscious Speakers," Leland E. Warren explains that sensibility, in terms of its literary application, was an ambiguous and tenuous term which partially contributed to a vague understanding of the concept in the eighteenth century. Warren claims to "know of no text claiming to teach the whole art of sensibility; indeed, I assume such a title would be oxymoronic."¹⁴ He cites lines from Hannah More's poem "Sensibility," which he says proves that sensibility cannot be defined. However, within this poem, More implies that a single definition will not suffice because sensibility affects the assorted people of the nation. More's poem develops the idea that sensibility has the power to communicate private feelings publicly and appeal to patriotic sentiment. While she primarily uses the example of a privileged female member of the Bluestockings to exemplify her points, More's ultimate argument is for the universal influence of sensibility. Her poem presents at least one formulation of sensibility which is designed to communicate its potent social power to both sexes. Indeed, in the genre of the "Address to Sensibility," women poets endeavoured to indicate the scope of sensibility, not just in the senses of its private use and its public meaning, but also with respect to gender. These poems establish women's direct

¹⁴ Leland E. Warren, "The Conscious Speakers: Sensibility and the Art of Conversation Considered," in *Sensibility in Transformation: Creative Resistance to Sentiment from the Augustans to the Romantics*, ed. Synty McMillen Conger (London, Associated University Press, 1990), 28.

discourse with sensibility—a valuable social concept which Warren claims More, and also Wollstonecraft and Jane Austen, encounter with difficulty and ambiguity.

Although Warren does recognise that “sensibility was not, of course, solely a female trait,” his next declaration, an elaboration of this point, is unsettling. He alarmingly declares that because “men of sensibility...are less common...[there is] [a]ll the more reason, then, to regard the man who joins power and sensibility as the ideal toward which all should aspire.”¹⁵ Although Warren joins a feminine sensibility with masculine authority in men, he does not explain an optimal state or role for women. His assertion of the existence of an “ideal” social mode for men begs further explication of the relationship of gender to sensibility. Indeed, it is necessary to develop this relationship that Warren excludes from his argument in order to discuss sensibility with respect to women writers. While Warren argues that the “ideal” is achieved when men combine masculine power with feminine sensibility, I would argue that women writers successfully developed a similar dual-gendered conception of sensibility.

Although women poets expressed the relationship of gender and sensibility in diverse ways, they commonly associated it with both sexes. Rather than characterising sensibility as a quality inherent only in women, female poets hailed it as a powerful force accessible to men, as well. Additionally, in their poetic representations of sensibility, “masculine” characteristics such as physical strength were often combined with more “feminine” concerns like domestic responsibility. This amalgamation of the masculine and feminine indicates another type of gender association.

¹⁵ Ibid, 33.

Therefore, I place significance not on the masculinised or feminised versions of sensibility to which Warren alludes, but on the idea that sensibility was a dual-gendered social quality both in its adoption of masculine and feminine traits and in its power to affect both sexes. Furthermore, when women poets classified sensibility as a dual-gendered characteristic and a social influence, they extended the community by creating a connection between men and women. Indeed, the sexes were brought together in a more diverse community through sensibility and the amalgamation of the masculine and feminine. Perhaps the “ideal” should not be expressed in terms of sensibility’s presence in men or women, but in its scope to stir both sexes alike and influence social change on the basis of the power of feelings.

Sensibility and the Public and Private

As it supplied them with the ability to feel openly and powerfully, sensibility was one method by which women writers publicly expressed their personal emotions, opinions, and identities. Primarily, sensibility offered an acceptable way for individuals to connect with others. The emotion of sympathy most clearly exemplifies this point. In fact, for women poets, the blending of the public and private spheres necessarily occurred when they expressed their feelings and opinions within their poems. Furthermore, I propose that while literature linked the public and private spheres, sensibility mediated between the two.

In her epistemological study of eighteenth-century conceptions of feeling, *Strange Fits of Passion*, Adela Pinch reveals that writers had difficulties deciding which emotion to express within their writings because of this mixing of the public and private. Pinch examines the work of philosopher David Hume which investigates the implications of allowing feeling to flow freely within society and permitting that

society to act upon those emotions. In *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–40), Hume explains feeling not just as an occurrence in individuals, but also as a powerful transmission of emotion between people. Sympathy, for example, is experienced because of the connection with another; it is not felt singularly. Hume also discusses the moral aspect of feeling, emphasising that the conveyance of emotions among people testifies to the social power of feelings in relation to morality. By conscientiously engaging with feeling, humans can explore emotional responses and choose a moral path. Moral sense philosophers, like Hume, perhaps supplied the culture with the further justification to express private emotions openly in the public sphere.

Pinch argues “that the concept of sentimentality itself may be defined precisely as a confrontation between the personal and the conventional.”¹⁶ Her definition presents a further alternative in the project of classifying sensibility. Essentially, Pinch suggests that people immersed within the culture of sentimentality may have drawn upon both private feelings and public conventions to express their sensibility. Certainly, in Pinch’s view, writers possessed a myriad of possibilities in order to locate the accurate emotion and to give a certain poignancy to their personal, sentimental works.

Yet sensibility was not merely regarded with increased interest and acceptance in the period, or used by those who recognised its potential as simply a way to describe their social experience in relation to gender, or represented as a mixing of private and public emotions. Women who openly expressed their beliefs through the utterance of emotions—in other words used their sensibility in a public forum—were claiming a space within the public sphere and also responding to the

¹⁶ Adela Pinch, *Strange Fits of Passion: Epistemologies of Emotion, Hume to Austen* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 8.

changing society. For women poets this certainly held great social significance. Initially, the public reinforcement of the importance of feeling and the increased acceptability of femininity gave women poets increased legitimacy. Accordingly, Romantic women poets, who were aware of the value and utility of sensibility, became crucial respondents to societal change. Ellis explains that “[s]ensibility was drawn into, and helped define, an increasingly open debate...and created spaces within public opinion for imagining and creating responses of individual and institutional reform.”¹⁷ For instance, in my examination of abolitionist poetry in chapter four of this dissertation, the potential influence of literary expressions of sensibility on British society is strongly apparent.

Therefore, sensibility blurred the boundaries of the separate spheres in multiple ways. Essentially, sensibility claims to be the public expression of private thoughts and emotions. Expressed within poetry, therefore, sensibility reinforced this connection of the public with the private since works of literature bridged the gap between the two spheres. Additionally, within political poems such as those against slavery, sensibility can also be regarded as an important cultural modifier with the potential to influence the fluctuating ideology of Romantic-period British culture. In this regard, the various expressions of sensibility can also be considered catalysts of cultural change.

Even today, numerous debates on sensibility have resulted in the establishment of antithetic arguments among experts in the field of Romantic literature. An imprecise dichotomy of ideas about sensibility in the eighteenth century exists among literary critics and historians alike. There are those who see sensibility as an all-encompassing theme within various literary genres and as a

¹⁷ Ellis, 17.

defining feature of the eighteenth century in regards to the political, economic, and societal changes taking place during this time. This first view is arguably political as it aims to emphasise sensibility's capacity for social change. Critics like Ellis believe that feeling had political and economic repercussions. Alternatively, others view sensibility as a tool used by authors for literary and cultural critique. Critics like Pinch and Barker-Benfield emphasise sensibility's personal aspects and look at individual authors' experiences to glean a greater understanding of the culture. This second view is more retrospective and subjective since it contends that sensibility is a tool for communication; it is a reaction to societal changes, not necessarily the cause of them.

Although both approaches are influential and defensible, I believe these critics miss a vital aspect of sensibility in terms of its mediation of the relation between the public and private. Ellis claims that sensibility affected the political occurrences in the period, while Pinch and Barker-Benfield regard sensibility as a reaction to social changes. I agree that in using sensibility to communicate social problems, discuss issues of gender, and debate emotional concerns, women poets merged the public and private spheres. Yet I further maintain that if sensibility was an acceptable form of emotional expression for women, those who used it within their writings to present powerful feelings and make social commentary were employing feeling not merely for its social impact and as a means for literary achievement, but for what I regard as a commodity of social exchange. My economic interpretation will be examined further in the following section.

The "Value" of Feelings and Social "Currency"

I see sensibility as a valuable cultural currency for women poets.

Traditionally, a currency is something which is used in exchange for goods and

services. Yet, in the Romantic period, sensibility performed a very similar function in that it allowed for the interchange of emotions, thoughts, and opinions which, in turn, reinforced relationships within the community and promoted societal transformation. Sensibility was akin to a common currency in that it was a universal and recognised (emotional) resource. However, whereas a common currency serves to promote economic development, this cultural currency served to catalyse social change and support community. In these ways, sensibility claimed social value.

This understanding, which injects the language of economy into the discussion of sensibility, informs another common economic debate of the time between luxury and necessity. In the period, the notion of the luxurious was often linked with questionable morality and excess. Initially, a “luxury” in the eighteenth century was in contradistinction to a “necessity,” especially in relation to purchased goods. Therefore, goods which were not deemed practical, useful, and necessary were considered luxuries. As Dena Goodman argues in an essay on luxury items in France, “[l]uxury would remain a moral category with which to condemn those consumers whose practice of consumption was seen as morally wrong, socially useless and politically harmful.”¹⁸

However, using Goodman’s explication of luxury as a guide, one can conclude that sensibility was deemed a necessity to the welfare of individuals and the nation. As Hannah More argued in the *Strictures*, a controlled sensibility, not excessive emotional outpouring, could lead one to fulfil an essential moral duty. Furthermore, since the expression of sensibility could help build communication with others and strengthen community, then sensibility was socially useful. And, if women expressed

¹⁸ Dena Goodman, “Furnishing Discourses: Readings of a Writing Desk in Eighteenth-Century France,” in *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century: Debates, Desires and Delectable Goods*, eds. Berg and Eger (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan Ltd., 2003), 75.

their sensibility in their attempts to alleviate the sufferings of slaves, end the trade, and stop the consumption of West Indian sugar, then sensibility was a notable political tool. Consequently, I believe it is essential to view sensibility as a social gauge and even a form of cultural currency.

Women's poetic appeals for abolition, as I explore in chapter four, further connected the economic with the emotional in two significant ways. First, of course, the lives of slaves were customarily ascribed a monetary value. Secondly and more importantly, in their emotionally-charged poetic pleas, women poets often negotiated the exchange of slavery for abolition by arguing that Britain would gain emotional well-being if the trade of slaves was terminated. In this example, social improvement is realised by using sensibility to express the evils of slavery and urge the society to embrace abolitionist sentiment. Once again, sensibility is a commodity of social exchange used by women poets.

Indeed, women poets were realising that sensibility was becoming a necessity for the exchange of emotions, the establishment of community, and the production of cultural change. In the Romantic period, women saw their roles within the society begin to alter. Increasingly, women gained more agency, in part as a result of commercialisation and industrialisation, as the role of citizens changed with respect to their economy. Concurrently, the feminisation of the culture allowed for the expression of emotion and a greater use of sensibility. Therefore, the intersection of sensibility and the economic marked an important development in Romantic-period culture.

As Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger argue, there was a shift in the interpretation of luxury over the course of the century to a view which considered the importance of feeling. It was no longer "just about goods, but about social behaviour.

It was increasingly perceived as a sociable activity, generated by cities and participated in by the middling as well as the upper classes.”¹⁹ They further explain that shopping provided not only “merchants and young ladies” but also “manufacturers, tradesmen, and the middle ranks” with the pleasure of socialising through “gesture and conversation which established an emotional relationship” between all participants in the consumerist chain.²⁰ These personal relationships and emotional investments in consumerism signified a changing regard for luxury and the importance of emotions in catalysing economic change within the culture.

Indeed, as the consumer society developed, emotions were often ascribed a monetary value, signifying the importance and relevance of feelings to social and ideological change. Ellis argues that “the frequent return to several key terms of value (‘sentiment’, ‘sympathy’, ‘benevolence’, ‘virtue’) exposes the mutually informing nature of philosophy, theology, science and political economy in the eighteenth century.”²¹ In his work, Ellis traces the link between various disciplines through the assignment of worth onto feelings. He discusses how a system of commodification operates in several of the sentimental novels he examines, such as *The Fool of Quality*.

These economic interpretations—Goodman’s, Berg’s and Eger’s, Ellis’s, and my own—necessarily raise issues of class. As Todd points out, “[w]riters in—as opposed to later scholars of—the eighteenth century had some difficulty relating class and sensibility. Sometimes they saw sensibility as equilizing since it occurred in all ranks; at other times they considered it a property more or less exclusively of the

¹⁹ Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger, “The Rise and Fall of the Luxury Debates,” in *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century: Debates, Desires and Delectable Goods*, eds. Berg and Eger (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan Ltd., 2003), 13.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

²¹ Ellis, 22.

higher and more genteel orders.”²² Regardless of class, all possessed the potential ability to feel. Indeed, sensibility was within the reach of men and women, public and private. Those who possessed sensibility were the owners of a great power of expression, and those who did not have such access to their feelings were perhaps not as emotionally “wealthy” as those who did. In the consumer economy of industrialised eighteenth-century Britain, it was difficult to escape the association of emotional value with social worth.

Reason and Feeling: (Controlled) Sensibility Cultivates Reason

Many women poets approached the issue of social worth through the connection of reason and sensibility because, while sensibility had emotional value, reason signified educational advancement, social growth, and even religious improvement. In *The Poetics of Sensibility*, Jerome McGann approaches this synthesis of thought and emotion through the two ideological frameworks of Romanticism and Modernism. McGann’s project is one of substantial importance to eighteenth-century studies as he concentrates his work on poetry, primarily that of female authors, and argues that sensibility, as well as the debates in the eighteenth century about its uses, was revolutionary to literary development. In relation to reason, he asserts that authors expressed their beliefs that “no human action of any consequence is possible—including ‘mental’ action—that is not led and driven by feeling, affect, emotion.”²³ McGann stresses the union of feeling and thought, emotion and action, in eighteenth-century discourses on sensibility and sentiment.

Sensibility’s capacity for fuelling cultural debate is most strikingly apparent in the eighteenth-century controversy about the alignment of reason and feeling. In fact,

²² Todd, 12–13.

²³ Jerome McGann, *The Poetics of Sensibility: A Revolution in Literary Style* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 6.

as Chris Jones explains, within the culture of sensibility, “one’s stand on matters such as the conduct of the private affections, charity, education, sympathy, genius, honour, and even the use of reason, became political statements, aligned with conservative or radical ideologies.”²⁴ Certainly, women were situated at the centre of this debate.

Conservatives like Hannah More and radicals like Mary Wollstonecraft represent two particular views within the debate and help establish an accurate picture of the accounts of sensibility and reason.²⁵ Although their works were compared and analysed in detail in the first chapter, I want to return briefly to their positions on reason and feeling here.²⁶

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft makes clear that a culture of femininity should not reign supreme. Yet she does not wish for the eradication of sensibility altogether. Rather, Wollstonecraft stipulates that men’s perceptions of heightened emotions as unruly should be eliminated. Women should control their feelings in an attempt to locate a balance between emotion and thought. Feeling can, in Wollstonecraft’s opinion, unsettle reason if it is left unchecked. But, feelings can also give women effect. Therefore, a controlled sensibility with the alignment of reason is important to her vision of an improved Britain. As Jones argues, “[f]or most writers feminine sensibility had to be regulated before it could be seen as an asset, while for some sensibility itself was a kind of natural control implanted particularly in the female breast as a divine compensation for their inaccessibility to reason.”²⁷ Although Wollstonecraft believed in the control of

²⁴ Chris Jones, *Radical Sensibility: Literature and ideas in the 1790s* (London: Routledge, 1993), 13.

²⁵ See Pinch, 2, where she also suggests this comparison.

²⁶ The works consulted are: Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, (1792; reprint, 2nd ed. with preface and additional criticism, ed. Carol H. Poston, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988); Hannah More, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education; with a view of the Principles and Conduct prevalent among Women of Rank and Fortune* (1799; reprint (2 vols. in 1), with intro. by Jonathan Wordsworth, Oxford: Woodstock Books, 1995).

²⁷ Jones, 5.

sensibility, she should not be placed within this latter category of writers; for, she ultimately believed that women as humans were endowed rationality by God, while their sensibility was an element of their feminine constitutions.

Hannah More, in her *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*, implements religion in order to discuss reason; she applies religious authority to her objections of uncontrolled sensibility. Yet she does not argue that women possess sensibility because they cannot be rational creatures, either. Again, for More, it was a matter of regulation and control:

...every study, which, instead of stimulating her sensibility, will chastise it; which will give her definite notions; will lead her to think, to compare, to combine, to methodise; which will confer such a power of discrimination that her judgement shall learn to reject what is dazzling if it be not solid; and to prefer, not what is striking, or bright, or new, but what is just. (Vol.2, 2)

According to More, if women can restrain and direct their sensibility, then they can be more rational, and moral good can come of their actions.

Michael Bell has suggested in his recent book on sentimentalism that “[i]nstead of reason and feeling being competing or supplementary elements within an overall model of the self that still assumed a broad cultural assent, in the 1790s ‘Reason’ and ‘Sensibility’ became polarised into rival political myths.”²⁸ Bell argues that the principles of reason were aligned with the radical causes of William Godwin and Thomas Paine, while the principles of sensibility were most commonly associated with conservatives such as Edmund Burke. Although Bell assigns no political significance to reason and sensibility per se, he does assert that there was a cultural conflict developing between the concepts in the period which can most clearly be seen in the works of Wollstonecraft.²⁹

²⁸ Michael Bell, *Sentimentalism, Ethics and the Culture of Feeling* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), 51–52.

²⁹ Ibid.

Wollstonecraft's emotional tone, within a work which persists in its intent to secure educational opportunities for women, has indeed led some to deem her work conflicted. Her amalgamation of masculine and feminine was not only her vision for Britain, but was also her literary strategy. This amalgamation is reminiscent of the relationship of gender to sensibility, discussed above. Indeed, Wollstonecraft utilises both rational and emotional methods for conveying her beliefs to her readers to gain the widest audience. However, Katherine M. Rogers views reason and sensibility as somewhat antithetical literary methods. She believes that "eighteenth-century women were neither so bold nor so systematic in their approach to women's rights as...Wollstonecraft. They preferred to base their claims on feeling rather than rational challenge....[M]ost women made use of the new respect for feelings to articulate the emotions and sanction the values that were important to them as women."³⁰ An argument such as this, once again, seems to separate the concepts of feeling and reason in the age, especially as it relates to women writers.

However, reason and sensibility were not contrary arguments during this period. In fact, it might be accurate to argue that it is precisely the employment of feeling—even if through a controlled sensibility—that allows one to be reasonable. As Wollstonecraft says, "the passions should unfold our reason."³¹ And, even as More stipulates, a sensibility under religious discipline will chastise the emotions, endow the powers of discrimination and rationality, and ultimately lead to the moral. In Ann Yearsley's poem "Addressed to Sensibility," this concept is most clearly supported. Within this work, Yearsley examines the experiences of a youth living in a mental hospital. She concludes that the young man cannot possess sensibility, not

³⁰ Katherine M. Rogers, *Feminism in Eighteenth-Century England* (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1982), 3.

³¹ Wollstonecraft, 14.

because he is uneducated or a male, but because he is not of a sound mind and lives in isolation from the greater society. Yearsley directly links the ability to reason with the ability to retain sensibility. This poem will be examined in depth in the following section.

THE GENRE OF THE “ADDRESS TO SENSIBILITY”

The examination above of the critical discussions of sensibility has exposed the complex debates on sensibility in the late-eighteenth century. I will now focus on the presentation of these debates in women’s poetry of the period. All of the selected poems in this chapter argue for the significant power of sensibility to affect privately, while also revealing its potential to influence more publicly and communally. Within these works, women writers additionally claim sensibility’s strong sense of negative and positive emotion in both sexes. While these basic and common elements allude to a more collective understanding of sensibility, the chosen poems also illustrate the diverse nature of the concept. Acquainting us with the more aesthetic elements of sensibility, the poems in the “Address to Sensibility” genre perhaps serve as a prologue to the political applications of sensibility seen in later chapters, such as the intervention into the abolition debate.

In response to Greville’s poem, Helen Maria Williams’s “To Sensibility” (1786; 1823) offers a straightforward perspective on the benefits of sensibility, exposing its potential as social currency. Hannah More’s “Sensibility: An Epistle to the Honourable Mrs. Boscawen”(1801) demonstrates the social implications of using sensibility to merge the public with the private for the good of the country, and to create a sense of commonality and community among intellectuals. In contrast, Ann Yearsley’s “Addressed to Sensibility”(1787) is a discussion of sensibility with respect

to class and reason. Frances Greensted uses a religious focus in her poem “Sensibility, Addressed to the Rev. J. Baily, LLB of Burbage”(1796) to expound sensibility’s philanthropic nature. Finally, in a poem unlike the rest, Isabella Lickbarrow’s “On Sensibility: A Fragment”(1814) explains sensibility as a menacing force which can make women weaker, a dangerous power that must be regarded with caution.

Through the examination of these poems written in the style of the “Address to Sensibility,” several conventions of women poets’ applications of sensibility will become apparent. Within their works of this genre, women poets define sensibility, evince its personal impact, and locate a connection between the public society and heightened emotion. They refer to the gendered, public/private, political, and even economic aspects of sensibility that have been outlined in the sections above, and present an argument that often broaches these themes conjointly. Indeed, within their literary explorations of sensibility, women poets connect the rational with the emotional, and sensibility with community, often through an example of a person of great sensibility or of a suffering soul. Nevertheless, while sensibility was widely considered a powerful social tool, women poets also expressed distinct views concerning its benefits within this frequently-used genre. Therefore, the prevalent application of sensibility as a means to access the bridge between the private and public spheres was complicated by the diverse perspectives that women poets had on the powerful effects of sensibility.

Helen Maria Williams: Sensibility and Communication

Helen Maria Williams (1761?–1827) was a novelist, historical journalist, and poet. She was born in London to a Welsh man and a Scottish woman. Although her

father died when she was only a young girl, Williams was fortunate enough to receive an education from her mother. One of her first literary accomplishments was writing poetry. Williams, a well-known socialite who resided in both England and France, used poetry as a way of communicating to the public her views on social issues such as slavery and politics.

While in France, she became a chronicler of the French Revolution, oftentimes sympathizing with the French although she had friends from nearly every political group. Her *Letters from France* became popular in England as a way for the English to follow the events of the war. But her life was marked by sadness. She alienated many of her British friends by living out of wedlock in Paris with John Hurford Stone. In addition, she lost many of her French friends by way of the guillotine. For a time, Williams and her family were arrested and held by the French government. Throughout her literary career, she wrote passionately on political issues, infusing radicalism into most of her work.³²

In "To Sensibility," Williams engages with Greville to refute her belief that indifference is desirable.³³ Williams's poem clearly indicates the turn by Romantic women poets, in contrast to their predecessor Greville, to embrace the powers of heightened emotion. Williams concentrates on the communicatory aspects of sensibility in order to convince Greville to abandon her request for indifference and solitude. Williams does not overlook the painful experiences that sensibility enhances. Instead, Williams introduces sensibility as a powerful, positive force which encourages an outward display of emotion, then argues for the inclusion of

³² Janet Todd, "Williams, Helen Maria," in *A Dictionary of British and American Women Writers 1660–1800*, ed. Janet Todd (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1984), 323–26.

³³ Helen Maria Williams, "To Sensibility," in *Poems on Various Subjects. With introductory remarks on the present state of science and literature in France* (London: G. and W.B. Whittaker, 1823), 111–16.

negative feelings to emphasise sensibility's wide scope. She concludes by urging Greville to live her life fulfilled under sensibility's guidance, as the alternatives are wholly disagreeable. Williams's poem directly defines sensibility's strengths through unadorned descriptions and simple arguments in an effort to convince easily those who, like Greville, are unsure of the need for sensibility.

Williams, who personifies sensibility as female in the opening stanza, assures the reader that she wants full knowledge of all available feeling:

In SENSIBILITY'S lov'd praise
I tune my trembling reed,
And seek to deck her shrine with bays,
On which my heart must bleed!

No cold exemption from her pain
I ever wish to know;
Cheer'd with her transport, I sustain
Without complaint her woe.

(1-8)

Williams glorifies sensibility by choosing words such as "praise" and "shrine" to begin her poem. Williams does not wish to cultivate a religious representation of sensibility, but wants to argue that it must be considered with respect and deference. In fact, Williams has no choice but to follow sensibility's guidance as she feels her "heart *must* bleed"(my emphasis).

One of sensibility's strengths lies in its ability to help people connect with one another; it encourages a mixing of public and private by lending emotional support. Williams specifies the potential for community by presenting sensibility through the familiar relationships of friendship and love. She believes that friendship's power lies in its ability "To heal the wounded heart, / To shorten sorrow's ling'ring hour, / And bid its gloom depart"(14-16)—all with sensibility's help, of course. Here, where positive emotions are expected, Williams inserts the negative in a bid to emphasise

her initial claim for the need of the full spectrum of emotions. Through friendship with someone who presumably possesses sensibility too, one may find peace and healing in brief moments of sadness.

Sensibility assists those in love, as well, by offering feelings as a medium of expression in times when words may fail:

She prompts the tender marks of love,
Which words can scarce express;
The heart alone their force can prove,
And feel how much they bless.

Of every finer bliss the source!
'Tis she on love bestows
The softer grace, the boundless force,
Confiding passion knows;

(21–28)

Indeed, sensibility is not defined by its faculty to communicate through words, but through outward emotions and physical responses. Here, emotions such as love and sympathy rely on one's connection with another. In matters of love, Williams gives prominence to the physical manifestations of sensibility; for, she believes that sensibility grants so much access to another's feelings that it is possible even to think that in one, "another lives!"(32). According to Williams, no connections between people would be possible without sensibility's incitement of the physical signs of an emotion.

In these examples, lovers and friends are brought together with the assistance of sensibility. But, sensibility's value lies not just in its gift to join lovers and friends in their private environments. In the social and more public world, feelings and their physical responses have a similar worth: "She knows the price of every sigh, / The value of a tear"(19–20). Here, Williams invokes an economic language to stress the importance of communicating with others in the greater society. Again, if sensibility

did not prompt a display of the physical manifestations of feelings, then valuable communication within the public sphere would cease to occur. Through an emphasis on the outward expression of emotion, Williams specifies sensibility's power to enhance communication in both the public and private spheres. Furthermore, by detailing sensibility's wide influence, Williams appeals to all, even those who may doubt her claims.

When it comes to more agonising emotions, sensibility becomes the friend who shares the pain:

Though she, the mourners' grief to calm,
Still shares each pang they feel,
And, like the tree distilling balm,
Bleeds others' wounds to heal;

(41–44)

In this stanza, the power of sensibility to pacify sadness is likened to nature's potent healing properties. It is natural, perhaps intrinsic, for sensibility to help others in distress. However, Williams specifies that sensibility cannot assist those who are senseless to her aid; even sensibility herself is harmed by the ignorant:

Though wounded by some vulgar mind,
Unconscious of the deed,
Who never seeks those wounds to bind,
But wonders why they bleed;—

(53–56)

The “vulgar mind” is incognizant of the attempts by sensibility to intervene in times of grief; sensibility is unable to heal this pain. Even though the “vulgar” can feel negative emotions, they are prevented from realising positive emotions because sensibility is restricted. It seems as if sensibility calls for a rational mind in order to be effective. Furthermore, since sensibility enables communication and supports community, as Williams previously explained, the “vulgar,” who disallow sensibility, therefore also lack social feeling. Williams, in the tradition of the genre, connects the

rational with the emotional and sensibility with community through a specific, intimate example of a suffering person.

All of these arguments attempt to refute Greville's plea for indifference. Williams asks, "Yet who would hard **INDIFFERENCE** choose, / Whose breast no tears can steep?"(61–62). Certainly, Williams trusts that she has answered this question convincingly within her poetic account of sensibility's strengths. No one, she argues, would choose to live without sensibility if it aids in forming valuable friendships, encourages love, calls for the outward expression of emotion, and invites social communication. Therefore, she addresses Greville herself: "Ah, **GREVILLE!** why the gifts refuse / To souls like thine allied?"(73–74). Williams classifies Greville as a woman of sensibility as her soul is joined with others who feel intensely. If she were to decline sensibility, others would suffer too because Greville would lose "friendship, sympathy, and love, / And every finer thought"(89–90).

Indeed, in her simple poetic plea for Greville to embrace sensibility, Williams clarifies its benefits and argues that heightened emotion is essential for its personal and social value. Not only does sensibility ease one's private pain, but it also provides an essential and favourable link with others in the more public sense of encouraging communication, often through the physical exhibition of one's emotions. Williams deals with friendship and love to indicate sensibility's impartiality to gender, thereby reinforcing a dual-gendered social environment based on sensibility's powers of communication. In addition, Williams's synergistic account of sensibility joins community and feeling with the rational. She warns Greville that if she were to abandon sensibility, she would be losing valuable relationships and her propensity for "finer thought." These are crucial considerations for any reader who may also be contemplating abandoning sensibility.

Hannah More: Sensibility and the Nation

A poem which delineates an argument for the social power of sensibility is Hannah More's "Sensibility: An Epistle to the Honourable Mrs. Boscawen."³⁴ First published in 1782, More was aware of her privilege as a female writer to reach the reading public. Her poetic epistle communicates the importance of sensibility to society and a woman's ability to use her capacity for intense emotion in a poignant manner. In More's account, sensibility is the mortar of society and gives people the strength to endure a changing and demanding world. If, as she believes, sensibility has such bearing on the survival of the nation, then one must dutifully follow the examples of others that possess this great sensibility in order to lead the country forward. Examples of important, strong, and sentimental literary women are incorporated throughout the poem in support of More's argument that sensibility is essential if the nation is to thrive. More uses the example of Mrs. Boscawen, a member of the Bluestockings and one of the greatest letter writers of her time, to illustrate the importance of women and sensibility to the nation. More wisely builds her argument from the basic qualities that make Boscawen a strong woman to the reason why her form of sensibility is so vital. The reader eventually sees Boscawen's stern but feminine virtues succumb to sensibility.

More begins by locating Boscawen within a friendly environment of intellectuals. More addresses Boscawen directly as she reminds the reader of the community of intellectuals to which many learned men and women belong:

Yes, still for you your gentle stars dispense
The charm of friendship and the feast of sense:
Yours is the bliss, and Heav'n no dearer sends,
To call the wisest, brightest, best, your friends.

³⁴ Hannah More, "Sensibility: An Epistle to the Honourable Mrs. Boscawen," in *The Works of Hannah More, In Eight Volumes: including several pieces never before published*, vol. 1 (London: T. Cadell, 1801), 135–55.

And while to these I raise the votive line,
O let me grateful own these friends are mine;

(41–46)

Boscawen has the luxury to “feast” upon the intelligence offered by her friends. She is not a passive observer. Rather, Boscawen gorges on the nourishing and sustaining supply of knowledge that her friends share with her within their closed, selective Bluestocking community. She is truly a blessed woman with regard to the accessibility of knowledge and learning, since even heaven above could not bestow upon her better surroundings.

But, the blissful Boscawen must not overshadow More herself. More informs the reader that some of the authors mentioned are her friends too, as signified in the line, “O grateful own these friends are mine”(46). More’s tone is very possessive, as if she believes she must compete with Boscawen. More does not begrudge Boscawen’s wealth of friends or knowledge, but she must prove that other female writers also possess Boscawen’s charms and abilities. It is important for More to stress that others hold a valued sensibility because it gives her vision greater substance and potential for success.

Therefore, in a fashion similar to Mary Scott’s canon-building poem “The Female Advocate,” More proceeds to catalogue several members of the group who possess great sensibility; she builds community in the process. Among those participants, she lists fellow female authors Elizabeth Carter, Elizabeth Montagu, Hester Chapone, Mary Delany, and Anna Barbauld. Prudently, she picks young and old, radical and conservative, rich and poor women to argue that sensibility affects all types. These women have the capacity to exhibit powerful emotions within their writings as they mix intellect and feeling. More proves she is one of these women

herself when she addresses Barbauld: "Nor, Barbauld, shall my glowing heart refuse / Its tribute to thy virtues, or thy Muse"(59–60).

Yet More's confidence in the power of knowledge to help represent through writing what is present in the heart seems to wane. She articulates her doubt of the coalescence of knowledge, feeling, and poetic ability when she asks:

Yet what is wit, and what the Poet's art?
Can genius shield the vulnerable heart?
Ah no! where bright imagination reigns,
The fine wrought spirit feels acuter pains;
Where glow exalted sense and taste refin'd,
There keener anguish rankles in the mind;
There, feeling is diffus'd thro' ev'ry part,
Thrills in each nerve, and lives in all the heart;
(65–72)

Upon first glance, More's questions seem introspective. She is fully aware that she remains open to the effects of sentimental, poetic feeling as she pauses to consider the implications of being a poet. More emphasises the complex relationship of the mind and the feelings. The heart is a "vulnerable" lifeline to the feelings a writer experiences. But, a writer's talent or superior intelligence do not protect against intense feelings. One cannot simply communicate feeling and use "genius" to protect against its sensations. In fact, More declares that a writer feels pangs of distress more sharply than most people. It is a sacrifice that authors, who possess "exalted sense and taste refin'd" must make if they are to participate in their art.

In addition, More asks like Williams, in direct response to Greville's poetic plea for indifference, if Greville would truly want to relinquish the gift of a great capacity for feeling in order to avoid the accompanying heartache:

Wou'd you, to 'scape the pain, the joy forego,
And miss the transport to avoid the woe?
Wou'd you the sense of actual pity lose,
Or cease to share the mournings of the muse?
No, GREVILLE, no!
(183–87)

Access to all of one's feelings is a valuable commodity and More stresses that it would be a "pity" to experience only a portion of the myriad of emotions accessible in the human heart.

However, expressing one's feelings is a risky business for the writer and More alerts the reader to be wary of an author's true intentions. Apparently, however, this rule of thumb applies only to male writers and their works:

There are, whose well sung complaints each breast inflame,
And break all hearts—but his from whom they came!
He, scorning life's low duties to attend,
Writes odes on friendship, while he cheats his friend.
(273–76)

The words "his" and "he" alert the reader to More's intentions of defining women as the principal possessors of sensibility. In fact, More gives many examples to ensure that the reader understands that sensibility is a feminine quality. For example, the notion of appropriate dress is expressed in the following passage:

So exclamations, tender tones, fond tears,
And all the graceful drapery FEELING wears;
These are her garb, not her, they but express
Her form, her semblance, her appropriate dress;
And these fair marks, reluctant I relate,
These lovely symbols may be counterfeit.
(261–66)

In this passage, "FEELING" is personified and runs parallel to the image of the properly attired woman. The varying forms of exclamation, tone, and emotion define feeling. Yet feelings can also serve to hide one's true emotions like clothing conceals a woman's body. More is "reluctant" to offer this information to the reader because it suggests that outward emotions may be false representations of one's true inner feelings. More, as a writer wishing to express her thoughts on the dangers of exhibiting sentiment, is caught between supporting sensibility and finding fault with the expression of feeling.

However, it is the connection between sensibility and women that More continues to emphasise throughout her poem. She uses the image of the domestic—traditionally a woman's domain and a symbol of a woman's proper social place in eighteenth-century society—to fortify her point: "There, SENSIBILITY, thou best may'st reign / HOME is thy true legitimate domain"(319–20). The use of capitalisation in these lines further links the two concepts.

These associations of women with sensibility through the examples of fashion and domesticity may seem problematic at first glance. Fashion, most commonly associated with frivolity and excess, does not convey women's strengths in terms of the capacity for emotion. Similarly, domesticity places women in a private sphere outside of the public realm occupied by their male counterparts. However, More is merely arranging her argument in order to support her other claims. It is precisely when a sentimental woman such as Boscawen gallantly exposes her feelings publicly that she becomes an example of a powerful, confident, and daring woman. Therefore, a woman must incorporate her feminine virtues into a strong, public role. Besides, men within the nation will also benefit from a woman's expression of her sensibility. Part of More's argument is that although sensibility may be a feminine trait, it must be acknowledged that sensibility is also good for the entire nation. Indeed, by mixing a "feminine" quality in the "masculine" public sphere of war-time Britain, More amalgamates notions of gender and assigns sensibility to both sexes.

Sensibility has the power to provide a lifeline to the people by uniting them through the expression of feelings. In the case of Boscawen, she exposes her private and most mournful emotions to the public in order to endorse Britain's war abroad. Upon the death of her husband, Admiral Boscawen, she endured much pain:

You, who for Britain's Hero and your own,
The deadliest pang which rends the soul have known;

You, who have found how much the feeling heart
Shapes its own wound, and points itself the dart;

(107–10)

Boscawen not only lost her husband for her country, but also revealed her “feeling heart” in a moment of self-punishing compassion. When her son leaves for battle, Boscawen succumbs to her feelings once again, yet believes in this sacrifice for Britain:

Yet why those terrors? Why that anxious care?
Since your last hope the deathful war *will* dare?
Why dread that energy of soul which leads
To dang’rous glory by heroic deeds?
Why mourn to view his ardent soul aspire?
You fear the son because you knew the sire.
Hereditary valour you deplore,
And dread, yet wish to find one hero more.

(377–384)

More questions why Boscawen would mourn for her eager son who desired to fight for his nation. It is not simply a matter of the valiant father and the duties of the son of an Admiral. Rather, Boscawen herself wants to recognise yet another hero in her son, even if it means losing once more and sacrificing her heart again for the good of the nation. Boscawen unites her feminine virtues with her public duty. Her sensibility helps her grieve for the loss of her husband and son. But, through the example of Boscawen, More also argues that sensibility is essential if Britain is to advance.

More, therefore, enumerates sensibility’s attributes:

Sweet SENSIBILITY! thou keen delight!
Unprompted moral! sudden sense of right!
Perception exquisite! fair virtue’s seed!
Thou quick precursor of the lib’ral deed!
Thou hasty conscience! reason’s blushing morn!
Instinctive kindness e’er reflexion’s born!
Prompt sense of equity! to thee belongs
The swift redress of unexamin’d wrongs!

Eager to serve, the cause perhaps untried,
But always apt to chuse the suff'ring side!
To those who know thee not no words can paint,
And those who know thee, know all words are faint!
(237–48)

More's own sensibility billows in an abundance of exclamation marks. More emphatically states sensibility's moral qualities, its virtuousness, and even its sense of right. As Stuart Curran argues, More wishes to stress that "[w]hat had been widely considered the defect of a female mind is there shrewdly reclaimed as its distinguishing virtue."³⁵ Indeed, within the last three lines is the connotation that women intimately know sensibility and can effectively harness its power to lend poignancy to their literary works. But, sensibility is also "unprompted" and "sudden," becoming a physiological phenomenon. Through this physical response to sensibility, More both claims the physical symptoms of sensibility as feminine and defines sensibility as "reason's blushing morn"(241). In this passage, More links the mind with the body, reason with sensibility.

Although More initially questions the connection of the mind with the feelings, she concludes that the mixing of the two is vital. She describes the coalescence as a strength by using Boscawen as a primary example of an intelligent woman who is also a woman of great sensibility. In case this example is insufficient evidence, More provides her own experience as a suitable model by allowing her sensibility to swell in her poetic lines. More portrays herself as a reasonable, intelligent writer whose poetry benefits from and exhibits the power of sensibility.

Within the poem, the reader learns of Boscawen's sensibility through the loss of her family and the public disclosure of her most intimate emotions. Indeed, More strongly identifies a powerful sensibility with its capacity for public display and its

³⁵ Stuart Curran, "The I Altered," in *Romanticism and Feminism*, ed. Anne K. Mellor (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), 195.

potential for establishing community. More uses the Bluestocking coterie to introduce the connection of sensibility and community; she argues that this supportive environment of intellectuals encourages the expression of Boscawen's sensibility. Likewise, when Boscawen publicly displays her innermost feelings, it is for the good of the nation and to communicate with others the importance of individual sacrifice, especially in times of war. A woman writer who publicly exposes her sensibility furthermore shares her thoughts and feelings to form a community of writers and readers. In this way, sensibility can communicate to everyone and strengthen community, even though More insists on identifying sensibility as a feminine virtue. She disagrees with Greville's plea for indifference by arguing that the range of available emotions is far more valuable than what indifference can offer. More's understanding of sensibility truly supports it as a virtuous, moral, and rightful attribute which can be used for the good of the nation.

Ann Yearsley: Sensibility, Class, and Reason

Ann Yearsley (1752–1806) was a writer of both prose and poetry. She was condescendingly known as 'Lactilla' or the 'milkwoman of Bristol' because of her working-class upbringing. According to some versions of her life, she and her family were rescued from starvation when they were found lying in a barn waiting to die. Hannah More heard of Yearsley's dilemma and started to educate her. More was pivotal in starting Yearsley's writing career and felt it was her duty to guard Yearsley's earnings. Yearsley took offence to More's controlling ways and their disagreement culminated in a caustic public argument over the money. More finally yielded to Yearsley's demands to control her own earnings. However, Yearsley's

writing was not terribly successful after this embarrassing incident and Yearsley died alone and relatively unnoticed.³⁶

Her poetry, however, brings the perspective of a working-class woman to the reading masses. In Ann Yearsley's poem "Addressed to Sensibility," class and reason are inserted into the discourse of sensibility.³⁷ While More uses the examples of Mrs. Boscawen and the Bluestockings in her discussion of sensibility and the nation, Yearsley approaches sensibility from a working-class perspective in her poem. Her contestations with sensibility on class grounds are articulated in terms of educational divisions, not monetary wealth. The reader is reminded by Yearsley that sensibility has an air of privilege. As stated previously, those who possessed great sensibility held onto a powerful social commodity. Within her poem, Yearsley reclaims the powers of sensibility for herself and others like her by using heartfelt sadness to convey her belief that sensibility can be used effectively by the educated and uneducated alike. Reason is not necessarily learned, but can be achieved through the combination of thought and emotion. Additionally, Yearsley emphasises that sensibility, however priceless, comes at a price of temporary grief and suffering to those who possess it. However, throughout her poem, Yearsley manages to critique the negative presumptions about sensibility while defining it in positive terms for her readers.

Yearsley takes the reader on a tour through her heart, stopping along the way to recall past, damaged souls that have been subjected to sadness. She begins with a reference to the tale of Laocoon, an ancient Trojan priest who was killed by serpents while he attempted to save his sons:

³⁶ Jill Rubenstein, "Yearsley, Ann," in *A Dictionary of British and American Women Writers 1660–1800*, ed. Janet Todd (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1984), 336–37.

³⁷ Ann Yearsley, "Addressed to Sensibility," in *Poems on Various Subjects* (London: G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1787), 1–6.

OH! SENSIBILITY! Thou busy nurse
 Of Inj'ries once receiv'd, why wilt thou feed
 Those serpents in the soul? their stings more fell
 Than those which writh'd round Priam's priestly son;
 I feel them here! They rend my panting breast,
 But I will tear them thence: ah! effort vain!

(1-6)

Interestingly, sensibility is referred to as a “nurse,” although in the next line the reader discovers that the “nurse” has been administering the terrible feelings harboured within the soul. In her reference to sensibility as a “nurse,” Yearsley hints at her beliefs that sensibility is good, is helpful to the soul, and is vital for one’s survival. Yet Yearsley delays in proclaiming sensibility’s positive attributes. She allows anxiety, fear, and perhaps even dread of sensibility’s negative feelings to build within the reader, as perhaps a true feeling would, before she reveals sensibility’s healing side.

Therefore, Yearsley relates Laocoon’s pain as her own when she states, “I feel them here!” Yearsley experiences the physical manifestations of her sympathetic feelings. However, her refusal of negative emotions fails even though she confidently states that she “will tear them thence.” Her attempt is in “vain” and she relinquishes her feelings to sensibility’s control. Sensibility does not respond to her aggressive, forward, and arguably “masculine” attempts to break free from its power. Yearsley, remaining passive and more feminine, trusts that sensibility will guide her. Through the image of the nurse and Yearsley’s more passive response, she asserts her belief that sensibility is in tune with the feminine. Continuing this theme of nurturing, Yearsley’s soul enters the confines of a mental hospital, which she likens to a prison, within her poem.³⁸ She witnesses a suffering youth who looks upon her with “fond

³⁸ In Duncan Wu’s anthology, his footnote to the passage reads: “‘Bedlam’ (Yearsley’s note). The Hospital of St. Mary of Bethlehem in London opened as a hospital for lunatics in 1402. As Yearsley indicates, treatment of the insane was, in the eighteenth century, little different from that of convicts.” Duncan Wu, ed. *Romantic Women Poets: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1997), 156.

enquiry”(13). Yearsley urges the reader to realise the difference between eternal suffering of the soul and temporary suffering at the capable hands of sensibility.

While the young man endlessly agonises, Yearsley’s emotional hardships are only the fleeting torments of her sensibility. This youth, whom her soul encounters, wonders why she is there. She reassures herself and the reader when she speaks to the youth:

‘Tis not Me,
Thy restless thought would find; the silent tear
Steals gently down his cheek: Ah! could my arms
Afford thee refuge, I would bear thee hence
To a more peaceful dwelling. Vain the wish!
Thy pow’rs are all unhing’d, and thou wouldst sit
Insensible to sympathy: farewell.

(13–19)

Yearsley makes it clear that she does not walk through the prison where the young man is being held; Yearsley is an affected observer, but not an eternal sufferer.

Remaining true to her description of sensibility as feminine and nurturing, she yearns to save him with an embrace and take him “to a more peaceful dwelling.” Yet again, her wish is in “vain” and she must follow her sensibility out of this mental prison and leave the youth behind. This imprisoned man is unfit to enter society because he is deemed “insensible to sympathy.” His powers of sensibility have been “unhing’d” by his mental illness. Here, Yearsley stipulates the ability to reason if one is to possess sensibility. In addition, because the youth does not possess sensibility and is overcome with mental anguish, he cannot live within society and, consequently, has been sentenced to live out his existence within these dreary, depressing confines. Therefore, sensibility also requires an involvement with the greater society, not an isolation from it, as Greville’s poem proposed. Sensibility obligates one to be of sound mind and a participant in the wider society. This passage initiates Yearsley’s engagement with the conditions of sensibility, especially in relation to reason and community. She returns to these themes later in the poem.

In the next stanza, however, Yearsley speaks of two subjects which cause her grief, yet hold importance in her life: friendship and money. Both are bound up with arguments about class, and she approaches the issue of friendship in relation to money:

Friendship, boast no more
Thy hoard of joys, o'er which my soul oft hung;
Like the too-anxious miser o'er his gold.
My treasures all are wreck'd; I quit the scene
Where haughty Insult cut the sacred ties
Which long had held us:

(25–30)

By mixing the images of friendship and wealth, Yearsley places a value on personal relationships. That value, however, is trivial when compared to the value of intense emotion. When once she would cherish and hold on to friendship, thinking it would lead to greater happiness, she now feels that friendship can be empty and deceiving. One wonders if Yearsley may be referring to her strained relationship with her wealthy mentor Hannah More.

However, in contrast to More's reliance on the more educated women of the Bluestockings to communicate sensibility in her poem, Yearsley emphasises within her poetic work that sensibility is accessible even to the uneducated. Yearsley offers herself as an example:

My rough soul,
O Sensibility! defenceless hails,
Thy feelings most acute. Yet, ye who boast
Of bliss / ne'er must reach, ye, who can fix
A rule for sentiment, if rules there are
(For much I doubt, my friends, if rule e'er held
Capacious sentiment) ye sure can point
My mind to joys that never touch'd the heart.

(67–74)

As a poor woman of the working-class, Yearsley describes herself as "rough," but states that even she has been able to feel the most "acute" emotions within her soul.

Yearsley protests at the association of class with sensibility on educational grounds. The word “rule” implies that sensibility is for the learned and not for the likes of Yearsley. Her tone turns at once biting and taunting when she addresses those members of the higher classes who have doubted her ability to feel intensely. Yearsley believes that the educated presume that her capacity to feel is sexual, as expressed in the phrase “joys that never touch’d the heart.” In the view of the upper classes, an uneducated woman like Yearsley would only experience carnal pleasures and feelings.

Yearsley addresses these “sophists” once again and challenges them to deny that they themselves have never experienced lustful desire:

Ah! self-confounding sophists, will ye dare
 Pronounce *that* joy which never touch’d the heart?
 Does Education give the transport keen,
 Or swell your vaunted grief? No, Nature feels
 Most poignant, undefended; hails with me
 The Pow’rs of Sensibility untaught.

(76–81)

The only certain thing that separates them from her is education. But, Yearsley is quick to remark that it is not one’s education that allows heightened emotion. Rather, it is “Nature” that supplies one with the ability to feel. Here, “Nature” is a reference not only to Yearsley’s lack of an education, but also to her station in life. She is a feeling woman who possesses the “Pow’rs of Sensibility” naturally. As Elizabeth A. Fay has argued, “by the end of the eighteenth century, emotion was thought to be a more pure response to nature and to other people than reason and proper behavior alone.”³⁹ Within these few lines, Yearsley reclaims sensibility for herself and others like her.

³⁹ Elizabeth A. Fay, *A Feminist Introduction to Romanticism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1998), 5.

So far, Yearsley has connected the powers to feel intensely not with education, but with natural ability, community, and a rational mind. Returning to the theme of rationality, she starts with the negative emotions that sensibility can rouse in order to argue later that positive emotions are felt with the introduction of thought. Initially, Yearsley defines sensibility's power as the ability to cultivate deep, dark emotions. Sensibility even has the faculty to turn happiness to woe:

Officious Sensibility, 'tis thine
To give the finest anguish, to dissolve
The dross of spirit, till all essence, she
Refines on real woe; from thence extracts
Sad unexisting phantoms, never seen.

(37–41)

Where negative emotions are concerned, sensibility seems to take control. One does not even need to harbour sad thoughts in order to feel sad emotions. Instead, sensibility will call up “unexisting phantoms, never seen” to one's breast. It is not necessarily, according to Yearsley, one's direct experience which produces negative feelings. Rather, one may feel these intensely sad emotions merely by possessing sensibility. The emotions that “Officious Sensibility” experiences are communally passed on to another. Indeed, without even knowing it, one's soul can be inscribed with sensibility's “viewless pencil”(44).

The next stanza starts a healing process in Yearsley as positive emotions finally appear. Yearsley returns to her previous stipulation that sensibility is present in those who can think rationally:

And when this dreary group shall meet my thought,
Oh! throw my pow'rs upon a fertile space,
Where mingles ev'ry varied soft relief.
Without thee, I could offer but the dregs
Of vulgar consolation;

(49–53)

When Yearsley's thoughts are allowed where until now sensibility has reigned, positive change commences. Yearsley is now in control of her own "pow'rs" and gains access to a "fertile space" of healing and comfort. These positive emotions are seemingly feminine as they are described as "fertile" and "soft." Yearsley controls her sensibility by combining it with her thoughts to produce positive emotions.

Yearsley confidently mandates sensibility's actions in the next few lines, giving instruction as to how to begin the healing process:

Raise thou my friendly hand; mix thou the draught
More pure than ether, as ambrosia clear,
Fit only for the soul; thy chalice fill
With drops of sympathy, which swiftly fall
From my afflicted heart: yet – yet beware,
Nor stoop to seize from Passion's warmer clime
A pois'nous sweet. Bright cherub, safely rove
Thro' all the deep recesses of the soul!
Float on her raptures, deeper tinge her woes,
Strengthen emotion, higher waft her sigh,
Sit in the tearful orb, and ardent gaze
On joy or sorrow.

(55–66)

Yearsley's hand is "friendly" which implies a wish to connect with others. She asks sensibility to mix a remedy for her to offer to the sufferers she has encountered. The elixir is both medically sound and religiously pure, as implied in the words "ether" and "ambrosia." The drinking container in which the elixir is offered is filled with Yearsley's own "drops of sympathy" which fall from her "afflicted heart." Sympathy is the panacea to one's pain as it alleviates the heart's anguish. Yet Yearsley again warns not to confuse the emotions; in order to find relief one must not search in "passion's warmer clime." Rather, Yearsley prefers that the healing emotions come from the "soul" and not sexual pleasure; time should be spent observing "joy or sorrow" rather than succumbing to quick passions.

In conclusion, within this poem Yearsley connects reason, sensibility, and community while challenging sensibility's link with class. Although in several places she associates sensibility with femininity, she does not deny sensibility to either of the sexes. According to Yearsley's model, encountering negative emotions is a rite of passage to the more positive emotions. Indeed, sensibility provides the entire range of feeling and any attempt to refuse it will be futile. Yearsley is a staunch supporter of the need to experience painful emotions in addition to peaceful and favourable ones. But, Yearsley's argument is steeped in instruction and condition. She uses the example of an anguished boy to introduce her discussion. The boy is unable to possess sensibility not because of his sex, but because he is not rational enough to make decisions and be a part of the society. Without sensibility, rationality, and the community, he cannot feel positive emotions and is doomed to suffer eternally. Yearsley, on the other hand, possesses sensibility precisely because she is a rational, emotional person located within society. Moreover, Yearsley knows that when she allows her thoughts to coalesce with her emotions, she will ultimately take control and guide sensibility herself. At first glance, this exchange of control is problematic to her argument that the uneducated can experience sensibility—perhaps even better than the educated—because of their assumed natural ability to feel intensely. She attacks the belief that sensibility is recognised as a possession of the learned classes by supplying her own experience as an example. Yearsley shows that sensibility is not provided to the educated alone, but naturally embedded within all of those who can mix feeling and thought. Yet she warns not to yield to sexual passion, but advises the embrace of the benefits of sensibility. She allows the reader to follow her on a sentimental journey through her soul wrought with pain, sympathy, and ultimately relief in order to prove that she desires to feel intensely, that she can think rationally

even if she is not formally educated, and that she can combine feeling with thought in order to find positive emotion and control her own sensibility.

Frances Greensted: Sensibility and Philanthropy

Domestic servant Frances Greensted (dates uncertain), in her poem “Sensibility, Addressed to the Rev. J. Baily, LLB of Burbage,” applies a religious focus to expound the virtues of sensibility.⁴⁰ Although she refers to sensibility as female, Greensted uses the examples of two men who exhibit the qualities of sensibility in order to amalgamate the masculine and feminine and proclaim sensibility as a force which transcends conventional gender associations. She imbues the Reverend with sensibility’s attributes, proclaiming him as a nurturing soul capable of lending a compassionate hand to those in need. Another generous man, Howard, aids slaves abroad and exhibits the virtues of sensibility in the process. Through these two exemplars, Greensted indicates sensibility’s powerful range, to impress men and women alike, and also its influence at home and abroad. Although sensibility is created in heaven, mortals spread its virtuous nature throughout the world. Indeed, it is sensibility’s power for social improvement that is emphasised throughout Greensted’s poem.

Greensted opens with a description of those who, she believes, lack sensibility. Therefore, she can praise its positive attributes and the honourable efforts of the Reverend and Howard for the remainder of her poem. Within these first few lines she manages to deny sensibility in the less virtuous, but boast its presence in herself:

⁴⁰ Frances Greensted, “Sensibility, Addressed to the Rev. J. Baily, LLB of Burbage,” in *Fugitive Pieces* (Maidstone: D. Chalmers, 1796), 23–25. Little is known of Greensted’s life, but the opening to her volume suggests she was a domestic servant.

Whilst some to sensual joys attune their lays,
And strike the chords to Vanity's gay strains,
Sweet SENSIBILITY, be thou my theme;
Thou sure criterion of exalted minds,
Which sordid nor degenerate hearts possess.

(1–5)

Not surprisingly in a poem directed to a holy man, she condemns sexual joys and vanity, and announces that those who lead shameful lives do not possess sensibility. Alternatively, those who have “exalted minds” are sure possessors of this greater power.

In writing about sensibility, Greensted places herself apart from these corrupt and depraved people. Although she claims in a further few lines that it is difficult to describe sensibility or to comprehend its powers, she acts as its representative because sensibility must appear in a positive light:

Arduous is the task
To speak a passion, felt (alas!) by few,
By fewer yet defin'd.
Bright must the tints appear, the pencil glow,

(9–12)

Greensted herself emerges inflated and vain in these opening lines. Not only does she implicitly claim that she has a virtuous and learned mind, but she also argues that she is writing about sensibility when few others can even feel its energies. For most of the poem, Greensted's language is fairly grandiloquent and she aggrandises sensibility. Her apparent arrogance contrasts with the implied reverent tone and religious focus of her poem. Perhaps to impress and flatter her addressee, the Reverend, Greensted both assures him that her subject matter is worthy of such praise, and that she is an unblemished messenger of sensibility's power just as he is an honourable man of God.

Her first descriptions of sensibility confirm it as a social influence: “...the warm'th of friendship's sacred flame, / The social intercourse of kindred souls, / The

tender union of the nuptial tye”(13–15). Analogous to Williams’s references to friendship and love, Greensted finds sensibility in relationships of friendship, family, and marriage. Whereas Williams fuses the negative with the positive when she declares that friends can heal emotional wounds, Greensted chooses instead to highlight the “Bright...tints” and “glow” of sensibility.

Greensted also elects, like the other poets, to stress the physical effects of sensibility within the body:

Where SENSIBILITY, bless’d, inmate, dwells
Virtue inherent: In her lovely train
Fair Sympathy attends with glist’ning eye,
And Charity still anxious to relieve,
From whence proceed those keen emotions, felt
At sight of woe; which, like electric fire,
Quick thro’ each nerve pervade the seat of life?
From whence the fond desire of sharing grief,
And, with mild Consolation’s healing balm,
Gently to soothe the mourner’s pangs to rest?
From when the deep sensations of delight,
The trilling exstacy the bosom feels,
When o’er the languid victim of despair
A gleam of comfort dart’s its cheering ray?
From SENSIBILITY;

(16–30)

“Sensibility,” personified as a female leader, guides the qualities of “Virtue,” “Sympathy,” “Charity,” and “Consolation” on their quest to help others. These qualities are in line with Greensted’s religious argument, as well, as they support a moral and compassionate way of life. Yet the purpose here is not merely to propound sensibility’s righteous and symbiotic nature. Greensted’s anaphorically structured lines pose a series of questions which ask readers to consider the physical reactions they sense when they become emotional. For example, when someone is sad from witnessing a distressing scene, Greensted reports that the body experiences responses which feel like “electric fire.” When one feels pangs of sympathy, one actually senses “Consolation” administering a “healing balm, / Gently to soothe.” This

example also identifies a natural and nurturing attribute of sensibility similar to Yearsley's description of sensibility as a nurse in her poem above. And, when someone senses a relief from misery, it is as if they have felt the warming rays of the sun. It is important to note that none of these reactions mimic a response of a sexual nature, for that physical feeling would be irreligious. Greensted is keen to distance herself from the possibility of her form of sensibility being aligned with the carnal.

Up to now, Greensted has portrayed herself as a woman enlightened with sensibility and has, moreover, designated sensibility as female. However, Greensted offers examples of men who possess the qualities of sensibility to show the diversity of its utility. These men are "delegates below"(32) who have been selected by heaven to represent the good nature of sensibility, "that spark divine"(30). The first man Greensted depicts is Howard, a "philanthropic soul"(33) who "Diffus'd it's [sic] influence to distant climes"(35). Greensted describes this foreign land as a place of "wretchedness and woe"(37). Yet Howard's influence relieves the suffering slaves and as a result they "scarcely felt the galling chain"(39). Greensted attests to the efficacy of sensibility through the charitable efforts of a missionary. The unprejudiced nature of sensibility is evidenced in Howard's endeavours to eliminate suffering abroad and in the positive effects he has on the foreigners. Indeed, sensibility does not just support those at home, as Hannah More's patriotic poem on sensibility may lead one to believe, but can help people world-wide.

However, the Reverend, her other man of sensibility, aims to heal those closer to home. While Greensted ambiguously identifies the suffering slaves as being from a "distant clime," she specifies a more intimate location where the Reverend is summoned to eliminate unpleasantness at home. She refers to the Reverend as "Eugenio:"

May'st thou, Eugenio, firm in virtue's cause,
 Thy gen'rous cares, unweary'd, still pursue:
 Still may compassion prompt thy ready step
 To seek the wretched mansion where reside
 Sickness and poverty, united ills.
 Here condescension elevates the man,
 And he soars highest who can sink the most.
 Long may thy bounteous hand that good dispense,
 Which oft' that chac'd a far their pallid race,
 And bade blith Health resume it's [sic] rosy hue.

(44–54)

“Sickness and poverty” reside together in a place where men are exalted for being low and contemptible people. Greensted suggests community's dependence on sensibility through the intimate look at a mansion which houses people devoid of sensibility and morality. Indeed, although they live in a mansion, they are socially poor and unfit to live amongst others, akin to Yearsley's description of the disturbed boy. The Reverend's duty, even his “Employ delightful”(57), is to help those who are socially ill and emotionally unwell so that they can re-enter society. Here, Greensted pairs sensibility with health and well-being; she simultaneously implies that those who are contemptible and amoral are socially unwell, lacking in sensibility, and unable to live within the community.

In the subsequent lines, Greensted follows an economic theme:

Employ delightful! e'en in act repaid!
 To which immense and sure rewards succeed!
 O SENSIBILITY! tho' great thy pains,
 Greater thy pleasures are. Who wou'd forego
 The noble luxury of doing good
 For light enjoyments, which with life, must end?

(57–62)

Although she maintains her argument's religious angle, Greensted emphasises the value and worth of using one's sensibility for the greater deed of helping others. She uses the words “repaid,” “rewards,” and “luxury” to signify this social value and importance. But these “rewards” are also personal triumphs as those who live

without superficial joys and find satisfaction in assisting others will ultimately be rewarded in heaven.

Greensted's poem, religious in tone, expounds sensibility as a beneficial and heavenly strength through the examples of two men who virtuously use their gifts for social healing. The missionary and the reverend heal the social wounds of the world by offering their compassion. Howard travels to a foreign land in order to alleviate the sufferings of slaves while Eugenio, the Reverend's poetic name, helps degenerate souls closer to home. In this poem, it would seem as if Greensted argues that sensibility exists more easily within the male sex because she chooses to highlight sensibility's power through the philanthropy of a missionary and a reverend. However, she ultimately argues for its presence in both of the sexes. Greensted places herself among these generous men by arrogantly describing herself as most able to write a worthy poem on the positive powers of sensibility. Although her words on sensibility may eventually speak to some reader, Greensted, perhaps to fall in good graces, places much emphasis on her own good nature and that of the Reverend. However, Greensted manages to sustain her primary argument that sensibility is a great social healer.

Isabella Lickbarrow: Sensibility and Its Dangers

Sensibility was not always regarded with such adulation. Isabella Lickbarrow's poem "On Sensibility: A Fragment," clearly reveals a divergent opinion from the rest.⁴¹ Lickbarrow (1784–1847), whose education was limited, and whose working-class status required her to work as a domestic servant,⁴² reveals in the preface to her volume that she "secretly indulged" in writing poetry to "increase

⁴¹ Isabella Lickbarrow, "On Sensibility: A Fragment," in *Poetical Effusions* (Kendall: M. Branthwaite and Co., 1814), 15–16.

⁴² Wu, "Isabella Lickbarrow," in *Romantic Women Poets*, ed. Wu, 471.

family comforts and better their condition in life”(iii). The generous assistance of friends enabled her to publish her volume of poetry in support of her orphaned sisters. Lickbarrow’s intriguing poem exhibits a darker representation of sensibility and implores men and women to be wary of its appealing but deceptive nature. Indeed, she labels sensibility a dangerous force—perhaps even a misogynist one—that does more harm than good, especially for women. Lickbarrow uses motifs prevalent in the poems above such as physical description, social relationships, male and female designations, religion, positive and negative divisions, and nature to make her case. Yet she does not employ these themes to praise sensibility’s national usefulness, personal worth, or social benefit like the women poets before her. Rather, Lickbarrow draws attention to the dangers of sensibility, such as: the lack of social judgement in a man of sensibility, the loneliness of a woman of sensibility, and the coldness of negative feelings, to name just a few. For Lickbarrow, sensibility simply cannot provide much happiness. Although she briefly ponders what indifference may offer, importantly, she does not follow Greville’s pursuit of insensibility. If only for a moment, sensibility retains a positive purpose—in heaven. Indeed, Lickbarrow’s only solution at the end of her poem is to suggest that relief from social hardship may be found in death.

From the very start, Lickbarrow brands sensibility as a “dangerous gift”(1). This contradictory description begins Lickbarrow’s distressed perception of sensibility as a quality which appears to provide happiness, but merely exists to produce sadness. Her descriptions frequently follow dichotomous even antithetical trends as she grounds her ideas in representations of warm versus cold, light against dark, or even strong rather than weak. In the process, sensibility assumes not the

expected light, warm, and strong attributes, but is the cause of more dark, cold, and unsatisfactory circumstances.

In the first stanza, Lickbarrow accepts that sensibility can generate both negative and positive emotions:

OH SENSIBILITY, thou dangerous gift,
Which, like Pandora's fabled box, contains
Compounded good and ill, the fountain-head
And source whence flow the sweet and bitter springs,
The pleasures and the pains of human life,
Exquisite joys, but woe more exquisite!
Whoe'er possess'd thee yet, that did not wish,
In some unhappy moments of their lives,
They could exchange thy quick and throbbing pulse,
For the dull sluggish tide which scarcely flows
Along the veins of torpid apathy –
Thy keen susceptibility of soul,
For the cold marble of indifference?

(1–13)

These opening lines contain nearly all of the points of contention on which Lickbarrow elaborates in the remainder of her poem. Within these lines, Lickbarrow reinforces her fundamental assertion that sensibility is a negative power that can affect all humans. In her depiction of overflowing emotion, she uses natural images of water through words such as “fountain-head,” “springs,” “flows,” and “tide.” The theme of nature is explored in more detail later in the poem as Lickbarrow focuses on the particular pains of sensibility. The phrase “good and ill” reflects upon a more religious intimation of sensibility's purpose in heaven, as opposed to its futility on earth. The taste sensations of “sweet and bitter” conjure more physical responses in the body which are further echoed in terms of hot and cold, weak and strong. The heart and blood are shown as markers of sensibility's bodily presence. The persistence of sensibility can be witnessed in the steadiness of a heartbeat, while indifference is akin to blood running through a clogged artery. While these bodily descriptions initially pair sensibility with health and insensibility with disease, it is

precisely this contrariness that is at the heart of Lickbarrow's contestations with sensibility. Throughout her poem, Lickbarrow argues that sensibility is misconstrued as a positive influence; while it may appear strong, for example, its strength merely lies in making those who possess it weak. Sensibility is mistakenly associated with health when, in fact, it will be discovered that it is harmful. Although at the end of this excerpt Lickbarrow ponders indifference, she will ultimately conclude that sensibility has its purpose.

Like the other poets, Lickbarrow begins by locating sensibility within both men and women, marking the amalgamation of masculine and feminine. Where in the first stanza sensibility is connected with the feminine by way of Pandora, in the second stanza, sensibility also embodies the masculine through the example of Prometheus: "Oh! ye who have from nature's hand receiv'd / That glowing spark of Promethean fire"(14-15). Sensibility is a feminine quality present in both men and women; it is also a masculine force like "Promethean fire" that is given to men and women by nature. Yet Lickbarrow's adoption of these two mythological tales does not signify her intention to make sensibility appear fantastical or fictitious. Rather, Pandora's release of evil into the world represents the dangers of sensibility, while Prometheus's acquisition of the rays of the sun represents the connection of sensibility to the forces of nature. These myths, therefore, conjointly define sensibility as an unavoidable corruption. For both sexes it is a dangerous endowment.

Lickbarrow traces these motifs by focusing first on the theme of nature: "If doom'd through desolate and rugged paths / Of life's obscurest wilderness to toil, / How much have you to dread and to endure"(19-21). The troublesome experiences of life are likened to a treacherous journey through devastated environments. As suggested in the words "desolate" and "obscure," these arduous journeys, life's trials,

are isolating and sensibility is culpable. Both Yearsley and Williams, even Greville, warn of isolation *without* sensibility. Here, Lickbarrow again upsets expectations by deeming sensibility the cause of isolation, rather than the protector from it.

In Lickbarrow's poem, "man" experiences these physical and social hardships as he trusts his sensibility to guide him through the rough terrain of daily life:⁴³

Much from the common casualties of life,
Untoward accidents, beneath whose weight
The man of fervent feelings soonest bends;
Much from the strength of your own warm affections,
Believing all sincere, and doubting none;
(22–26)

Unanticipated events can cause one to buckle under pressure. Although sensibility may seem to supply "strength," it also causes weakness. Man is too naïve and apparently trusts others too willingly. Although man possesses "warm affections," friendship harbours only "Repulsive coldness"(29), and the future is adorned with "dreary views"(32) instead of "fairy sunshine"(28). The liberties afforded to man in this world are weakened by sensibility. Man is a victim of "mistaking"(27) one thing for another, and this is Lickbarrow's lasting message about the deceptiveness of sensibility. Indeed, sensibility is a false friend and, under its deceiving guidance, one loses worldly judgement. Lickbarrow disturbs the reader's expectations by initially presenting sensibility as warm, friendly, and strong. Yet readers come to realise that sensibility merely bestows upon us a dark future in which things are not as they seem.

More specifically, the prospects are bleaker for women. Lickbarrow argues that when sensibility is "enshrined within a female frame"(36), one is "much more unfit"(37) to bear potential hardships. Like the passage above, Lickbarrow here applies the themes of social interaction and physical strength to express her concern with sensibility's effects on women:

⁴³ Here, "man" represents humankind, although the implication of gender is interesting.

To struggle through the thorny paths of life,
If she can find no kind and generous friend
In whom her confidence she may repose,
Her guardian and protector through a world
Where oft her weakness will require support.

(38–42)

So women do not only confuse enmity and friendship, but they have difficulty just forming a friendship. Yet the requirements for female friendship are more endearing, and perhaps demanding, because women offer guardianship and protection. The familiar argument of mere gender as the cause of a woman's "weakness to require support" is swiftly countered. Crucially, Lickbarrow's focus on sensibility's influence on women shifts to a discussion of the symbiosis of the heart and the mind. The focus is removed from gender and women's innate weakness, and instead is placed on the presence of reason in women. She exclaims in a description of "Mary," a "hapless orphan"(43):

Thy heart was form'd for tenderness and love;
Thy mind a beam of light breaking through clouds,
Shone like a meteor, with unsteady ray,
Irregular, and bright, but shone in vain.
And now perhaps its energy is lost
And all its powers are buried in despair.

(44–49)

Again, Lickbarrow uses images of dark and light to warn that sensibility suppresses positive attributes like a bright mind and a tender heart, two attributes strongly present in the woman she describes. Thus, with the influence of sensibility, Mary's mental "energy is lost" and her emotional "powers are buried." Indeed, she is lacking strength of character, the faculty to reason, and the ability to feel.

To banish the negative consequences of sensibility, Lickbarrow finds no alternative but to exclaim that one may find "A lasting peaceful home within the grave"(52). Lickbarrow grimly suggests that "There is a world where sensibility, / So oft on earth the fruitful source of grief, / Will be the source of purest happiness"(54–

56). Thus, sensibility requires divine intervention. Indeed, only in heaven does sensibility serve a worthwhile purpose. However, her convincing argument—that the only way to counteract sensibility’s devastation is to die—is not necessarily steeped in religious significance. The realisation that one’s end is the sole option to obtain peace forces the physical correlation with sensibility to its limit; only in death can a person of sensibility know happiness.

Lickbarrow’s dramatic and depressing poem represents a departure from the positive and reaffirming portraits of sensibility offered by the other women poets within the genre. Observed within this striking work is Lickbarrow’s persistence in unsettling expectations and presenting negative views of sensibility. Lickbarrow herself utilises the more conventional themes of nature, gender, physicality, sociality, and religion, but treats them in an unconventional manner in relation to sensibility. While mankind in general suffers under sensibility’s influence, women emerge as the most injured. Man is generally misguided by sensibility and cannot truly judge another’s character. But, sensibility has a more sinister effect on women as it alters the efficacy of their hearts and minds. In this sense, sensibility can be deemed a more dangerous force for women because they lose rationality and feeling. Unquestionably for Lickbarrow, if men and women ever experience tranquillity and joy, it will only occur after they are dead.

While it could be argued that Lickbarrow’s poem takes an inimical stand to the other poems discussed here, I suggest that it should still be seen as a part of the “Address to Sensibility” genre. Lickbarrow certainly presents a unique examination of sensibility and asserts her individual beliefs. However, she exhibits commonality in the themes she addresses. For example, she mixes masculine and feminine as do her fellow poets. And, although she struggles with defining the relationship of reason

and sensibility more than the others, she does ultimately argue that women can be strong figures when they think and feel. Crucially, she does not abandon sensibility altogether like her desperate predecessor Greville. In fact, although she upholds a harsh view, she reserves sensibility's positive influence in the more peaceful place of heaven. She does not abandon intense feeling like Greville, but holds on to a powerful sense of emotion in her descriptions of sensibility's dangerous nature. Perhaps her work verifies that sensibility was a complex, contested, and contradictory topic in the Romantic period. Certainly, the diverse nature of sensibility has been evidenced in these examined poems.

CONCLUSION: THE COMPLEXITY AND DIVERSITY OF SENSIBILITY

As sensibility gained wider public exposure in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, the fervour of the debate about its social significance also increased. In literature, the reading public had many sources from which to gather information on the significance of feelings and sensibility. Even in medical texts of the time, feeling and its physical side effects were commonly discussed. However, these texts were often full of misdiagnoses and false conclusions. For example, George Cheyne's discussions of the vapours, or episodes of madness, in his work *The English Malady* (1733), have been accused of exhibiting "lunatic logic."⁴⁴ Female literary critics were aware of the power of feelings to affect readers, and often encouraged writers to appeal to emotion. As Anne Mellor argues, "[t]hey knew that the female sex had historically been identified with passion, with 'sensibility,' with the emotions. They embraced the capacity of women readers to feel intensely, and

⁴⁴ Christine Battersby, *Gender and Genius* (England: The Woman's Press Ltd., 1989), 87.

argued that literature should stimulate the reader's ability to feel sympathy and disgust, pity and revulsion."⁴⁵

In his examination of the novel and sentimentality, Ellis argues that "[t]he recognition that sensibility is both 'a fashion' and 'was fashionable', testifies to its cultural centrality, but also establishes it as essentially unstable."⁴⁶ Women poets were aware of the social significance of sensibility and attempted to come to terms with this powerful influence. Indeed, as women explored sensibility within their poetic works, they were manipulating an accepted social characteristic to mediate between the public and private spheres. In the Romantic period, this literary use and representation of sensibility is most notably seen in the poetic works which I have categorised as the "Address to Sensibility" genre. Women expressed points of commonality which helped root sensibility as a powerful, valid, and social force. Yet they also maintained individuality and expressed their different views in the interest of speaking to a wide audience, adding to the way the term was understood in the period.

The genre of the "Address to Sensibility" testifies to the diverse nature of the literary sphere and the complexity of sensibility. The poems examined above exhibit many of the principal features common to Romantic women's poetry including: the use of feeling, the amalgamation of masculine and feminine, an acknowledgement of common sentiment with an emphasis on diversity, and a response to the changing culture. Moreover, these prevalent themes are echoed within the particular characteristics of the genre, such as: the emphasis on the dual-gendered nature of sensibility, the presence of sensibility in the public and private spheres, the value of

⁴⁵ Anne Mellor, "A Criticism of Their Own: Romantic Literary Critics," in *Questioning Romanticism*, ed. John Beer (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 39.

⁴⁶ Ellis, 35.

community, the symbiosis of the heart and mind, and physical responses. Gender, the public and private, reason and feeling, community, and diversity are not just important issues within the sensibility debate, but are also central topics within the “Address to Sensibility” genre.

It might seem reasonable to argue that Isabella Lickbarrow’s poem contrasts with the other works presented here as part of the genre. Certainly, her poem presents a distinct view of sensibility which is perhaps, upon first glance, more in line with Frances Greville than Frances Greensted and the other Romantic women poets. However, a final consideration of Lickbarrow’s poem, in comparison with the others, confirms that it displays the same features of the new genre, shows the complex nature of sensibility, and testifies to the diversity of women’s Romantic poetry.

With respect to gender, each poet presents sensibility as a force which affects both sexes, a signification typical in the genre. For More and Williams, a feminine distinction remained at the forefront of their arguments, although neither denied sensibility to the male sex. In their poems, even though sensibility is principally a feminine force, it is presented as a dual-gendered influence which leads to the creation of a comprehensive sense of community. Yearsley and Greensted, on the other hand, both introduce sensibility as a feminine figure, yet exemplify its social influence through individual examples of men. Either by indicating its presence in men and women, or by amalgamating masculine with feminine, these women attest to the dual-gendered nature of sensibility.

Lickbarrow approaches the issue of gender and sensibility from an entirely different angle, but still accounts for sensibility’s presence in both sexes. Lickbarrow does not exalt its presence in women like More or Williams, or signify male characters as possessing sensibility like Greensted. Alternatively, sensibility itself

assumes masculine and feminine characteristics when Lickbarrow borrows the mythological figures of Prometheus and Pandora to enhance its devious disposition. Lickbarrow presents sensibility in a dismal light—believing it is harmful to men and especially to women—through generalised examples of a man and a woman who suffer under sensibility's influence. Although Lickbarrow emphasises that sensibility is a more dangerous force against women, she nevertheless presents it as a dual-gendered problem.

The topic of community is crucial in all of these poems, as well. Each of the women, besides Lickbarrow, attests to the promising influence of sensibility in public life. In order to indicate that a private sensibility is connected to the efficacy and improvement of the community and culture, they present the reader with examples of the Bluestockings, humanitarian aid, friendships and love, and social community. To these poets, sensibility offered a connection with others that could be regarded as a social value.

Although Lickbarrow upholds a despairing view of sensibility, she still manages to argue for the importance of social relationships. Even in her repudiations of sensibility, she maintains that community must prevail. She urges those private individuals under sensibility's influence to ensure that they do not falsely trust another or misjudge social relationships, consequently attempting to preserve community. Additionally, Lickbarrow implies that in death, when sensibility takes on positive attributes, one will be a part of a more pleasant and favoured community in heaven.

Intermingled with disputes about sensibility's penetration into the public sphere and the refinement of community are affirmations of the necessity of reason. In terms of the rational, all of the poets discuss the association of reason and sensibility—or the relationship of the heart and mind—each in their own way: More

clearly coalesces the two within Boscawen; Yearsley stipulates its essential association through the account of a desperate and distressed boy who exists without reason and suffers without sensibility; Williams implies the link through examples of the vulgar who do not possess either attribute; Greensted similarly describes contemptible people in order to deny sensibility in the less reasonable; while Lickbarrow's most convincing argument for the danger of sensibility lies in her connection of reason and feeling in women.

In her contrary view, Lickbarrow values a woman's capability to combine the functions of her heart and mind, particularly without the aid of sensibility. She declares that women who possess the strength to combine mental and emotional powers are at a great risk if sensibility were to take control. Here, Lickbarrow views sensibility as a dangerous influence precisely because women may lose the ability to mix their feelings and thoughts successfully. Her argument is a peculiar departure from the association of reason and feeling that her contemporaries endorse. In order to ensure reason within women, Lickbarrow does not argue for a controlled sensibility like Williams, More, Yearsley, and Greensted. Instead, she chooses to maintain the relationship of emotion and thought by discounting the importance of sensibility. Rather than argue that women must possess controlled sensibility in order to be reasonable, Lickbarrow clearly places women as the possessors of reason and feeling outside of sensibility's influence and, in turn, presents women as strong, emotional, and intelligent. The importance of this argument is that Lickbarrow, like the others, grapples with the association of reason, feeling, and sensibility within the genre of the "Address to Sensibility."

In all of the examined poems, the intrinsic elements of gender, community, and reason are frequently approached through the acknowledgement of the physical

effects of sensibility. Readers witness firsthand the physical symptoms of sensibility in More's poem. She both testifies to sensibility's effect on the body by providing physical description and linguistically expresses her overwhelmed emotions in exclamation marks. Similarly, Yearsley attests to her own physical responses when she states that she feels sympathy for the suffering Laocoon. Williams relies on the body's physical responses to sensibility by claiming that it is only by these tangible signs that connections with others become possible. Greensted also attests to the physical powers of sensibility by describing the effects of its virtuous characteristics in others. Many of these physical responses mimic those found in nature such as lightning or the sun. Lickbarrow also prefers to describe sensibility through images of nature even though she finds that with sensibility, one feels coldness, weakness, and pain. She maintains this physical association with sensibility when she offers that the physical discomforts of sensibility will end with death, while emotional solace will reign through sensibility's dominion in heaven.

Although she presents a striking, alternative view of sensibility, Lickbarrow follows the formula of the new Romantic genre by defining sensibility, tracing its personal impact, and linking emotion with community through the common themes of gender, community, reason, and physical response. Thus, Lickbarrow's text is crucial in indicating the shift in the attitude toward sensibility by the 1780s. In several significant ways, Lickbarrow's poem contrasts with Greville's earlier plea for indifference. Primarily, Lickbarrow desires to keep emotion, whereas Greville certainly does not. Lickbarrow also wishes to keep the physical responses to emotions, often relying on physical description to make her claims, while Greville wants these responses to cease. In her strongest argument for indifference, Greville proclaims that it will allow her to live a solitary existence in a place which is immortal

and heavenly. At the end of her poem, however, Greville cannot realise her goal to remain reclusive, alone, and without feeling. In strong contrast, Lickbarrow links sensibility with community in heaven. Lickbarrow realises her aim to experience desirable emotion after death. In terms of her engagement with sensibility, Lickbarrow expresses community, feeling, physical response, and a feasible plan for dealing with emotion more resolutely than Greville.

Indeed, Lickbarrow does not wish to eliminate sensibility like Greville, who addresses her poem to "Indifference." Lickbarrow, on the other hand, chooses to engage with sensibility head on, confronting the negative aspects of its nature that she believes have been underestimated. But, her poem on sensibility is merely "A Fragment," which indicates that Lickbarrow explores her complicated distrusts of its influence, power, and potential, but does not reject sensibility altogether. Rather, she concludes that sensibility, not indifference, "will be the source of purest happiness" in heaven. Certainly, Lickbarrow became a part of the Romantic literary community by responding to her changing culture in a new and vibrant way.

In conclusion, these poems of the Romantic period indicate how the language of sensibility penetrated into the private, public, political, and economic domains. The genre of the "Address to Sensibility" has been examined in order to show how women poets engaged with and contributed to the complex debates about sensibility in the period. By commenting on sensibility's wide scope, women politicised the debate and suggested ways in which the culture could be influenced by sensibility. I maintain that Romantic women poets represented and used sensibility as a social currency to mediate between the public and private worlds that literature helped to bring together.

3

DEFINING COMMUNITIES

I proceed to mention a scheme of my father's. He thinks that a periodical paper to be written entirely by ladies would succeed; and we wish, that all the literary ladies of the present day might be invited to take a share in it.—No paper to be rejected—each to be signed by the initials of the author's name—each to be inserted in the order in which it is received¹
Letter from Maria Edgeworth to Anna Barbauld, July 22, 1804.

All the literary ladies Mercy on us, have You ever reckoned up how many there are or computed how much trash & how many discordant materials would be poured in from such a general invitation—I feel also doubtful of the propriety of making it declaredly a lady's paper—there is no bond of union among literary women, any more than among literary men, different sentiments & different connections supports them much more than the joint interest of their sex would unite them. Mrs Hannah More would not write along with you or me & we should probably hesitate at joining Miss Hayes or, if she were living, Mrs Godwin²
Letter from Barbauld in reply to Edgeworth, August, n.d.

As this correspondence between two prominent literary women attests, women writers envisaged a literary community suited to their personal needs, but one which

¹ Maria Edgeworth to Anna Barbauld, 22 July 1804, RP 346, British Library.

² Anna Barbauld to Maria Edgeworth, August, n.d., RP 346, British Library.

would also emphasise heterogeneity. In the first letter, Edgeworth supports her father's conception of a journal for women, a publication in which every participating woman would have a "share." This word implies that each woman would ideally have an equal representation within the journal and could consider herself an equal partner within a common literary group. As no submission would be declined, the proposed work would generate a fair, accepting, and non-judgmental literary space solely for women. In Edgeworth's model, the literary community is at once accepting but restrictive. The suggestion that only women would be allowed to publish within this journal eliminates the inclusion of men and the intellectual amalgamation of the sexes. Yet Edgeworth seems pleased at this limitation, arguing that a journal conceived solely on behalf of women could provide an accessible platform for public expression and literary acceptance. Edgeworth wants to know what Barbauld thinks of her idea; it is important to Edgeworth to have support from a fellow literary woman and friend. Again, she finds comfort in the knowledge that she remains in the company of women both privately and publicly. She eliminates the anxieties of entering into the literary community by providing an open invitation to all literary women and removing the possibility of rejection.

However, her friend Barbauld's vision of the literary community is strikingly different; and Barbauld is resolute in her reply. In a witty manner, she emphasises that inviting any and all women to publish work in the journal will result in a decline in quality. In fact, Barbauld seems quite appalled by the thought of the potential amount of disagreeable submissions. She also believes that there is no intrinsic connection among writers purely because of their sex. From her statements against this proposed journal, an expanded argument for the complete integration of women within the larger literary culture may be inferred. Barbauld certainly does not want

women in a separate literary community at the expense of merit, but would rather see women's integration in a more intellectually-discerning literary community which amalgamates artists of both sexes in respect of personal beliefs.

Barbauld's and Edgeworth's contrasting views of the composition of literary community beg further examination of the possible constructions of community during the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. Their letters also set the scene for the subsequent discussions of poems which envisage, develop, and challenge ideas of community in the Romantic period. This chapter explores the significance of various forms of community by interspersing within these discussions poems which question these forms. The poems engage with different models of community to address the theme of a woman's ability to participate in the literary culture easily and successfully. The poetic works analysed here illustrate that, although women poets used sensibility as an effective currency between the public and private spheres, they still struggled with their art as they tried to assimilate with the literary culture.

Despite the growing opportunities in the literary culture for women poets, they still encountered certain "traditional obstacles," according to Anthony Barker, when it came to sharing their work publicly: "the opposition of family and friends, self-consciousness about lack of education, and a social and religious training that subordinated all other activities to domestic duties."³ Although Barker's study investigates the 1730s and 40s, at the core of his argument lies an observation that should be extended to women writers of the Romantic period. Romantic women writers also needed to negotiate their private concerns with their newly developing

³ Anthony D. Barker, "Poetry from the Provinces: Amateur Poets in the *Gentleman's Magazine* in the 1730s and 1740s," in *Tradition in Transition: Women Writers, Marginal Texts, and the Eighteenth-Century Canon*, eds. Alvaro Ribeiro, SJ and James G. Basker (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 255.

literary activities. Therefore, they commonly sought support from patrons, subscribers, and sympathetic friends in anticipation of publishing their works, establishing respectable reputations, and earning money. Yet these relationships did not produce for all women writers a favourable atmosphere in which to work. Many sought support in other ways, like the comfort of the sense of community established through literature. As Robert W. Uphaus and Gretchen M. Foster argue, they garner “first, an awareness that they are writing about women for women and, second, a strong sense that as women writers they belong to an ever-increasing community of women writers.”⁴

My examination of the development of late-eighteenth-century intellectual spaces shows that the new social, intellectual, and literary environments formed during this era reinforced the acceptability of women in the public sphere. The library, coffee-house, and literary salon were at once social, intellectual, and literary as they provided a sociable space in which readers and writers could gather to discuss intellectual matters of the day. However, the literary community was sometimes a less distinct group of writers, readers, and critics. Although patrons and coteries provided feelings of community through personal associations, for the most part, writers practised a solitary art in which their communications with others relied on the spread of the written word. Indeed, the connections between writers were often implied, seen as creative influences and “imagined” affiliations. In this respect, critics played an important role within the literary culture and the Reviews structured an additional facet of community. These interrelated constructions of community are explored in this chapter because they contributed to the overall account of the literary culture which informed the poetry analysed below.

⁴ Robert W. Uphaus and Gretchen M. Foster, introduction to *The Other Eighteenth Century: English Women of Letters 1660–1800*, eds. Uphaus and Foster (East Lansing: Colleagues Press, 1991), 1.

For the women poets whose work is examined here, their entry into a literary culture which increasingly allowed and welcomed women's contributions was still marked with contention. Their community was naturally concerned with questions of social difference and diversity whether they sought to associate men and women in the literary culture, as did Barbauld, or emphasised the strengths of women writers, as did Edgeworth. Barbauld's letter especially helps to chart the uneasiness of women writers entering into the literary culture and the challenges of that culture to define a public space accepting of women and open to diversity. Barbauld's political objections to the journal form interesting complements to similar anxieties felt by other women writers as they prepared their work for public view.

Barbauld's anxiety about the inclusion of all women, her acknowledgement of the personal differences inherent among various women writers, and her concerns about her affiliations with and public acceptance of those groupings are all expressed within her epistolary response to her friend's suggestion. These more specific themes supply a framework for this chapter by delineating the various arguments expressed within several important poetic works which address different models of literary community. Women poets' affiliations with the literary culture registered discomfort based on their literary associations, the anxiety about their public reception, and the social differences in the literary community, as the letters of Barbauld and Edgeworth indicate. I address each of these concerns with analogous detailed examinations of various works by women poets of Barbauld's and Edgeworth's time in order to establish that the entry of women into the literary community proved to be marked with strife even though writing was an increasingly accepted activity and profession.

INTELLECTUAL SOCIAL SPACES

In order to examine the various factors which typified women's struggles within the literary culture, it is essential to develop a working model of the intellectual community whose exponential growth during this time enabled women writers to become part of the society with greater approval. I have shown in earlier chapters that with a feminisation of the culture resulting from an increasing acceptance of "feminine" ideals, with a wider use of the "currency" of sensibility, and with women's greater prominence on the literary scene, the gendered gap between the private and public spheres of late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century Britain was narrowing. Indeed, the society was changing from one based on masculine ideals to one which formed a more feminised version of the principles which structured British culture. As discussed previously, political views, class, the economy, and gender were all in flux during the tumultuous years of British Romanticism. Likewise, the development of the literary community and the establishment of public intellectual spaces accepting of women were highly unstable endeavours during this period in British history.

Libraries, Coffee-houses, and Salons

Essentially, it was the growing desire to dispense and receive information, along with the developing publishing industry, which caused the spread of literature and the expansion of the trade to reach new heights in the eighteenth century. With an increase in literacy nation-wide and technological advances in the production of written materials, a much larger constituency were now frequent participants in the development of the literary culture. As Lucy Newlyn has argued, "[t]he consequent shift from a literature written for an elite audience to one written for the public at

large promoted a rapidly expanding publishing industry.”⁵ Higher literacy rates and the pressing demand for reading materials established literature as a critical dispenser of information to all.

At the suggestion of the Reviews’ literary critics, the reading public could buy books which were often very expensive and, therefore, only an option for the wealthier classes. However, readers could also visit a circulating library which gave access to a wide variety of works. Working-class poet Ann Yearsley opened a circulating library in Bristol. In the eighteenth century, the number of libraries in Britain increased substantially. Although she offers no statistics, Jacqueline Pearson has deemed this increase “a ‘library revolution’, with the rise not only of private aristocratic and genteel libraries but also of library societies, reading clubs, civic libraries, early public libraries and commercial libraries.”⁶ Libraries are prime examples of the blurring of the boundary between the public and private spheres. The library, in addition to offering literature, was a site for socialising among readers. Citizens could enter the public space to peruse materials privately and converse with others.⁷

On the other hand, as Pearson also argues, circulating libraries were associated “with nonsense, novels, a public space and transgressive sexuality [which] made them problematic for respectable female users.”⁸ It has even been suggested by Sonia Hofkosh that novels publicly consumed by women readers in the space of the library blurred the boundaries between acceptable and lascivious feminine behaviour.⁹

⁵ Lucy Newlyn, *Reading, Writing, and Romanticism: The Anxiety of Reception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 7.

⁶ Jacqueline Pearson, *Women’s Reading in Britain 1750–1835: A Dangerous Recreation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 160.

⁷ See J.R. Oldfield, *Popular Politics and British Anti-Slavery: The Mobilisation of Public Opinion against the Slave Trade, 1787–1807* (London: Frank Cass, 1998), 12.

⁸ Pearson, 161.

⁹ See Sonia Hofkosh, *Sexual Politics and the Romantic Author* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 19.

However risky to a woman's reputation, the library did offer access to information and a public space in which to share knowledge with others. Consequently, women who had access to literature opened communication between their private lives and the public world, fracturing these social boundaries in the process.¹⁰

In the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, new intellectual and social spaces such as reading groups, philanthropic societies, and debating clubs, were established for both men and women. While these groups were still organised along gender lines, they symbolised the spread of ideas, the growth of intellectual space, and the attempt to create a public place for the dissemination of private thoughts and beliefs. According to Gary Kelly, these social spaces were areas “where differences—political, religious, social—that had in the past led to disastrous political crises, and even civil war, might be set aside for common interests. These spaces of civil society ranged from clubs to public concerts, spa resorts to pleasure gardens, public lectures to public subscriptions for a wide range of purposes.”¹¹ These public places and activities were starting points to finding common interests and establishing a viable social community. Women participated in a wide variety of these social gatherings, in particular the debating societies of London which provided a vital link to politicised, public discussions.¹² Yet it was still a fraternal domain since most clubs and societies were not just urban-based, but also catered primarily to their male members. This is not to say that women and the greater acceptance of “feminine” ideals did not influence the more “masculine” environment of some of these intellectual groups.

¹⁰ See Vivien Jones, introduction to *Women and Literature in Britain 1700–1800*, ed. Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 6.

¹¹ Gary Kelly, “General Introduction,” in *Bluestocking Feminism: Writings of the Bluestocking Circle, 1738–1785 vol. 1 Elizabeth Montagu* ed. Elizabeth Eger (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1999), xxiii.

¹² See Brian Cowan, “What was Masculine about the Public Sphere? Gender and the Coffeehouse Milieu in Post-Restoration England,” *History Workshop Journal* 51 (2001): 133.

The coffee-house is a useful example of the complexity of these spaces because it was a social, and to some extent intellectual, space reserved primarily for men in which gender considerations were problematic. A coffee-house was commonly just a room within a private home that was opened for serving coffee. Thus, coffee-houses were ambiguous spaces caught somewhere between the public and private spheres.¹³ This infiltration of the domestic into the public, or perhaps vice versa, complicated the neat boundaries desired for an intellectual space to be enjoyed by men. Although women were not entirely prohibited from entering the coffee-house, upper class women would not dare enter.

The coffee-house was a controversial space where women were ambiguous figures. One view, as argued by Brian Cowan, is that the coffee-house was a space primarily for men where the presence of women disturbed masculine behaviour. Cowan explains that the image of a coffee-house woman was indecent and disagreeable since the role of a coffee-house woman “fit[s] into the pre-existing stereotypes of either the virtuous servant or the vicious prostitute.”¹⁴ In other words, the women who were present in the coffee-house environment either served the men or distracted them because of their sexuality.

Men could gather at the coffee-house in anticipation of discussing prominent matters of the day, political views, and important issues. But with the freedom to discuss any variety of topics, the possible rowdiness of male customers, and the ambiguity about women within the space of the coffee-house, fears arose about the distractions which could prohibit serious, valuable conversation. Cowan argues that “as a single-sex milieu firmly located in the forefront of the normative public sphere,

¹³ Ibid., 149.

¹⁴ Ibid., 142.

the coffeehouse was the seat of a whole host of anxieties about the proper regulation of masculine behaviour.”¹⁵

However, this more traditional view has been challenged, most notably, by Markman Ellis who discusses the evolution of the coffee-house in his essay “Coffee-women, ‘The Spectator’ and the public sphere in the early eighteenth century.”¹⁶ Ellis suggests that the coffee-house environment mirrored the transformation of manners in the public sphere to more sentimental, feminine, and regulated forms of taste, politeness, and conversation. In his essay, Ellis associates the privatisation and feminisation of the public sphere with the eventual change of the coffee-house setting to a more civilised space.¹⁷ However, he argues that even though the presence of women within coffee-houses disturbed the Habermasian model of the public sphere, and although the “construction of femininity fill[ed] a central but paradoxical role in the civilising process,” the transformation in the coffee-house was “only available to men.”¹⁸ Through his examinations of several eighteenth-century texts on the sociability of the coffee-house, Ellis determines that a woman within this social space was still thought of as sexualised and depraved. But, he also argues that the coffee-house woman was an ambiguous figure of femininity in that she sometimes epitomised the role of a prostitute, but often represented an “empowered femininity” as the proprietor.¹⁹

Even though the place of women was problematic in the space of the coffee-house, in public places in general women could be considered a valued influence on the regulation of masculine behaviour. As Peter Clark observes,

¹⁵ Ibid., 136.

¹⁶ Markman Ellis, “Coffee-women, ‘The Spectator’ and the public sphere in the early eighteenth century,” in *Women, Writing and the Public Sphere, 1700–1830*, ed. Elizabeth Eger et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

¹⁷ Ibid., 30.

¹⁸ Ibid., 31 and 30.

¹⁹ Ibid., 38.

towards the end of the 18th century there are suggestions of a growing perception of the unacceptability of certain forms of traditional male behaviour in public and quasi-public places. One factor may have been the growing influence of notions of sensibility, refinement, and good manners, encouraged by the new literary fashion for sentimentality, itself shaped by the enhanced importance of women in the public world.²⁰

In the eighteenth century, the number of women's social groups was growing and often involved philanthropic work undertaken by the upper classes. Especially as it related to women's societies, class was still a factor which disrupted the ability of women's groups to proliferate in the city and around the rural areas. For example, the board of the Friendly Society for the Benefit of Poor Women consisted of wealthy members who paid higher dues for the privilege to place conditions on memberships or even to deny membership to poorer people.²¹ Additionally, it has been suggested that lower-class women often socialised informally within their neighbourhoods while more affluent women participated in more formal groups and structured circles of friends and activities.²² Yet in the development of circulating libraries, the evolution of the coffee-house environment, and even the growing prominence of social groups (if still not strongly associated with both genders or conducive to "feminine" sociability), more pronounced intellectual communities were beginning to take shape.

For instance, an excellent example of the concept of shared knowledge, intellectual growth, and dual-gendered community is the Bluestocking Circle. The Bluestocking Circle, a group inspired and guided by Elizabeth Montagu, offers a model of this form of intellectual community, one which was initially governed largely by class values. As M.G. Jones explains, the incipient goal of the first

²⁰ Peter Clark, *British Clubs and Societies 1580–1800: The Origins of an Associational World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 451.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 358.

²² *Ibid.*, 450.

generation of Bluestockings was to influence the “social rather than literary. To them may be ascribed a share in the reform of the manners and social behaviour” in English society at the time.²³ Montagu and her fellow Bluestockings, as Gary Kelly argues, were “interested in the cultural revolution and the broader movement of modernisation in state, economy, society, and culture, for these movements promised transformative, if not revolutionary alliances between progressive gentry and professional people.”²⁴ Yet their earnest support of education for women and their consciousness of their standing as influential members of society instituted their involvement in more literary and educational projects.

Conceived as a forum for conversation among the literate middle-to-upper-class men and women of London, the Bluestocking Circle fostered an atmosphere of acceptability of literary women, allowed accessibility to an intellectual community of like-minded people, and provided a sociable environment based on the exchange of ideas that has come to represent the power and value of learned women. Affectionately named after the blue-coloured stockings of member Benjamin Stillingfleet, the Bluestocking Circle originally aimed to join men and women in a common social space.

The main elements of Bluestocking ideology placed emphases on learning and friendship. Their group provided the forum through which ideas could circulate and spread. Indeed, as Elizabeth Eger has argued, Montagu “was instrumental in the delineation of three important spheres of activity in which relationships between women were purposefully forged: correspondence, patronage (within the context of salon culture) and conversation.”²⁵ In a letter to Elizabeth Carter, Montagu writes that

²³ M.G. Jones, *Hannah More* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952), 49.

²⁴ Kelly, xlv.

²⁵ Elizabeth Eger, introduction to *Bluestocking Feminism vol. 1 Elizabeth Montagu*, ed. Eger (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1999), lvii.

she is reading a book on the history of Greece and desires to share the work with her friend in order to increase her own enjoyment of the book, expand her friend's knowledge of the country, and widen the audience of the writer:

I love to see the mental modes of the age + Country, the History relates what was done, the Historian shows how the Athenians reason'd + spoke + there is a vast deal of sense + weight in this excellent writer, so that I think there cannot be a more delightful amusement than to read him with you.²⁶

Montagu's idea was to emphasise learning and support literature.

The Bluestockings are commonly thought of as a community of erudite women from various social groups. According to Sylvia H. Myers, this reinterpretation was initiated by "critics of the female bluestockings who limited the term to women. This shift in gender indicates contemporary awareness that the 'bluestockings' had in fact broken the taboo against learning for women."²⁷ Evelyn Gordon Bodek has even termed the Circle a type of "informal university for women" because of its atmosphere of intellectual development and the exchange of knowledge among peers.²⁸

Over the course of the eighteenth century, the Circle successfully developed from a group interested in social progress through intellectual support to an environment in which literary women could share their ideas and join a network of other writers. But, the Bluestocking Circle was not strictly a literary salon. Its members supported the work of women writers, fervently wrote letters to each other, and, above all, strove to create a club of learned men and women who could converse shrewdly on a wide variety of topics. It is this emphasis on the importance of

²⁶ Elizabeth Montagu to Elizabeth Carter, 12 November, 1773, MO 3329, The Huntington Library.

²⁷ Sylvia H. Meyers, "Learning, Virtue, and the Term 'Bluestocking,'" *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 15 (1986): 280.

²⁸ Evelyn Gordon Bodek, "Salonieres and Bluestockings: Educated Obsolescence and Germinating Feminism," *Feminist Studies* 3, no. 3/4 (1976): 185.

conversation that is celebrated in Hannah More's poem "The Bas Bleu; or, Conversation"(1786).²⁹

"The Bas Bleu:" Supporting Intellectual Community

Not originally intended for publication, but as a gift to ailing Elizabeth Vesey who was an attendee and organiser of Bluestocking gatherings, this poem praises the feeling of community promoted by the meeting of various individuals who share knowledge for the common goal of mental and social betterment. More establishes a link between the current Bluestocking salons and the "rare Symposium"(5) offered by Plato in "the days of early Greece"(3). By labelling the conversational atmosphere of intellectual Athens the "first *Bas-bleu*"(8), More places historical importance on the act of conversing. Montagu, Vesey, and their group were not important as pioneers, but rather as continuing supporters of a valued and ancient intellectual and social practice. It is the use of conversation within their contemporary circle that More wishes to glorify. In comparison with the ancient male custom of dining and conversing in Athens, the modern-day use of conversation as a tool to build an intellectual community gains greater significance. More later argues that her contemporary social gatherings admit women, therefore making them stronger than their historical predecessor.

Indeed, it was not until Vesey, Montagu, and Boscawen, More's subject of praise in her poem on sensibility, rescued conversation from the contemptible group activities of cards and dancing that the British salon atmosphere recovered its respectable and desirable aim:

²⁹ Hannah More, "The Bas Bleu; or, Conversation. Addressed to Mrs. Vesey," in *Florio: A Tale For Fine Gentlemen and Fine Ladies: and, The Bas Bleu, or Conversation: Two Poems* (London: T. Cadell, 1786), 65–89.

Long was Society o'er-run
 By Whist, that desolating Hun;
 Long did Quadrille despotic sit,
 That Vandal of colloquial wit;
 And Conversation's setting light
 Lay half-obscur'd in Gothic night;
 Till LEO's triple crown, to you,
 BOSCAWEN sage, bright MONTAGU,
 Divided, fell; – your cares in haste
 Rescued the ravag'd realms of Taste;

(38–47)

In this passage, More mixes historical figures and political inferences to describe the salon culture. In order to highlight the achievements made by her friends in building a successful intellectual group, More describes the interests of the previous salon in a disagreeable light. Intriguingly, More personifies these inferior activities as tribal warriors who, like oppressors, rule unfairly and demonically. Boscawen and Montagu have rescued the salon environment from power, control, and futility by reinforcing a diverse community supportive of open conversation. Just as More defines unwelcome activities as male, she fittingly later describes conversation as female and nurturing: "Hail, Conversation, soothing Power, / Sweet Goddess of the social hour!"(212–13), "Thou bliss of life, and balm of care!"(233).

However, it is not just cards and dancing to which More objects. Fashionable society and the falseness of the French salon are equal evils. Again, More invokes historical gatherings to emphasise that the conversational groups formed in eighteenth-century England are superior. She believes that the French salons of the Marquise of Rambouillet in the seventeenth-century failed to let true intellect and conversation thrive. Instead,

...equivoque,
 Distorted every word they spoke!
 All so intolerably bright,
 Plain Common Sense was put to flight;
 Each speaker, so ingenious ever,
 'Twas tiresome to be quite so clever;

(60–65)

To More, members' plays on words and the perpetual need to appear more scintillating than others damaged the atmosphere of the French salon. Women, too, who were interested in "polish, ton, and graces"(101) merely succeeded in appearing overwhelmed at the overbearing atmosphere that they helped create:

Scar'd at the many bowing round,
And shock'd at her own voice's sound,
Forgot the thing she meant to say,
Her words, half-utter'd, die away;

(116-19)

The voice of this girl of fashion is not even heard; her attempts at conversation fail in the intimidating French salon of style and charm.

In contrast, the Bluestocking Circle's ambience is calm and supportive. More begins by describing its shape as a circle composed of various other shapes, symbolising the diversity of characters present at gatherings and the ease with which the members associate with each other:

See VESEY's plastic genius make
A Circle every figure take;
Nay, shapes and forms, which wou'd defy
All science of Geometry,

(140-43)

This approbation by More that Vesey was able to adjust and improve the dynamics of the group alludes to and addresses the prevalent criticism of Montagu's strict use of a circular formation which often disrupted the free-flowing nature of conversation. As Deborah Heller has argued, "members of her company were indeed reduced to silence or robbed of their privilege of turn."³⁰

More continues her theme of scientific references to indicate that the Bluestocking Circle permitted different groups of people to mingle and allowed the mixing of individual ideas for the good of the whole;

³⁰ Deborah Heller, "Bluestocking Salons and the Public Sphere," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 22 (1998): 71.

But Chemists too, who want the essence,
Which makes or mars all coalescence,
Of her the secret rare might get,
How different kinds amalgamate:
And he, who wilder studies chose;
Find here a new metempsychose;
How forms can other forms assume,
Within her Pythagoric room;

(156–63)

More catalogues the miscellaneous members present at a routine, but exceedingly idealised, gathering. They are men and women of different classes and opposing political beliefs; all of the attendees are virtuous, honest, and moral. They do not necessarily share anything else but a common interest in lively, stimulating, and valuable conversation. Everyone is welcome:

Here sober Duchesses are seen,
Chaste Wits, and Critics void of spleen;
Physicians, fraught with real science,
And Whigs and Tories in alliance;
Poets fulfilling Christian duties,
Just Lawyers, reasonable Beauties;
Bishops who preach, and Peers who pay,
And Countesses who seldom play;
Learn'd Antiquaries who, from college,
Reject the ruse, and bring the knowledge;
And, hear it, age, believe it, youth,
Polemics, really seeking truth;
And Travellers of that rare tribe,
Who've *seen* the countries they describe;
Ladies who point, nor think me partial,
An Epigram as well as MARTIAL;
Yet in all female worth succeed,
As well as those who cannot read.

(168–85)

All is perfectly copacetic. Truly, More's idealist vision for the perfect gathering generates a tone of impossibility. It would seem as if the formation of a successful conversational group is rather utopian and unrealisable as the participants are strikingly faultless. Perhaps More's descriptions of the Bluestocking group have become inflated due to her desire to cheer up and enliven her ailing friend Vesey,

considering that, further on, More explains that intellectual value is the key component of successful conversation, not the fortuitous gathering of overly virtuous pillars of the society.

To this end, she locates value in several possibly attainable entities including education, commerce, curiosity, genius, sympathy, and spirituality. More describes the particular value of these things through an economic interpretation:

Our intellectual ore must shine,
Not slumber, idly, in the mine.
Let Education's moral mint
The noblest images imprint;
Let Taste her curious touchstone hold,
To try if standard be the gold;
But 'tis thy commerce, Conversation,
Must give it use by circulation;
That noblest commerce of mankind,
Whose precious merchandise is MIND!

(242–51)

In this section of the poem, education, taste, and the mind are given worth as currency in a conversational world. Furthermore, the use of these distinctions is essential because their social value is attained only after they have been distributed. In other words, one must exchange knowledge with others in order to have valuable conversation, one's virtue must be shared in order to influence and improve others, and social circulation is tantamount to friendship. As Myers argues, "[f]or the bluestockings themselves, learning, virtue, and friendship *were* inextricably linked. In their own eyes to be a bluestocking meant to be an impeccable member of an intellectual community which included both men and women."³¹

Furthermore, when this kind of social and intellectual exchange occurs, "kindred sympathies unite; / When correspondent tastes impart / Communion sweet from heart to heart"(279–81). It is not merely a meeting of the minds, but a union of

³¹ Sylvia Harcstark Meyers, *The Bluestocking Circle: Women, Friendship, and the Life of the Mind in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 11.

emotions. More extends a warning, however, that there is one lurking danger when meeting in such a promising atmosphere with others: “What is this power you’re loth [sic] to mention, / This charm, this witchcraft? ‘tis ATTENTION”(334–35). According to More, vanity is like a form of sorcery that can distract one from more virtuous goals. Therefore, she quietly reminds the reader that a contributor to a conversation is likewise there “to listen and to learn”(339).

Thus, “The Bas Bleu” is not only an encomium of Vesey’s achievements and the success of the Bluestocking group, but is also an endorsement of the good deeds conversation permits. Although at one point More aggrandises her model of intellectual community, she recovers her poem from this unachievable account. The traveller, curious woman, genius, common reader, and the uneducated alike enjoy a similar desire to share their thoughts and experiences with others. It is a realistic goal to share knowledge even if not everyone is part of the Bluestocking Circle. Emphasised throughout her poetic lines is the wider aim to promote conversation and the spread of knowledge.

In conclusion, it is evident that the public spaces of the library, coffee-house, and salon extended social places for the spread of knowledge to women. Although these spaces blurred the boundaries between the public and private spheres, the boundaries were even more ambiguous where gender was concerned. Although libraries provided women with a wide variety of literary works, this plethora of reading material has been deemed by some to be problematic for the maintenance of proper “feminine” behaviour. Interestingly, it was the influence of the “feminine” on the coffee-house environment which ultimately helped make it a more successful social space with the potential for intellectual exchange for men. In all, the most prominent social group to combine a variety of intellectual pursuits through literature

and conversation was the Bluestocking Circle. Their literary salon successfully joined men and women in a supportive intellectual and social space which exemplified the interrelated nature of the various constructions of social and intellectual community. Consequently, More's poem about the strengths of the Bluestocking group encourages a sense of intellectual, social, and literary community.

ASSOCIATIONS IN THE LITERARY COMMUNITY

Patronage and Mentors

Promoting conversation, spreading knowledge, and building intellectual community were not as easy as More's poem may suggest. To many women writers who lacked the support of an immediate intellectual community, patronage and subscriptions were alternatives for joining the literary culture for the first time. Patronage had been a common form of literary mediation since medieval times. By the eighteenth century, patronage, besides being another model of community, was a system which functioned because of the discrepancies between the classes. As J.M. Bourne argues, it is a unique "relationship between individuals of unequal status, wealth, and influence, what the anthropologist J.A. Pitt-Rivers described as 'lopsided friendship'."³²

The most famous, or perhaps notorious, example of this type of assistance amongst the Bluestockings is the relationship of Hannah More and Ann Yearsley. More was pivotal in starting Yearsley's writing career, rescuing her from severe poverty by supporting her poetic achievements. While Yearsley, unknown and uneducated, needed a respected member of the literary community to endorse her poetic works, More also considered the opportunity to be a patron to Yearsley

³² J.M. Bourne, *Patronage and Society in Nineteenth-Century England* (London: Edward Arnold, 1986), 5.

beneficial to herself. Indeed, More's motive was at least in part egotistical. More wrote to a friend: "After having considered her character with admiration, a certain selfish principle...suggested to me that I might obtain great pleasure if I could be the means of promoting her prosperity."³³ More took it upon herself to guard Yearsley's earnings, but Yearsley objected to More's controlling ways. Their disagreement culminated in a caustic public argument, effectively ending their once-promising working relationship. Before the dissolution of their association, More managed to organise one of Yearsley's most successful volumes under subscription, essentially gathering preliminary and assured support for Yearsley's work.

Yearsley celebrates the generosity of her mentor Elizabeth Montagu and the support of her patron More while simultaneously objecting to the structure of the literary community in her poem "On Mrs Montagu"(1785).³⁴ This mixture of an emphasis on a woman's good nature and positive influence, with a focus on the difficulties women experience in accessing the literary culture, provides an interesting perspective on the literary community and the patronage system. "On Mrs Montagu" is often a fairly biting examination; Yearsley takes a bold stance and harshly describes misogynous man.

She argues in the opening lines of the poem that she is not afraid to express what she thinks and feels:

Why boast, O arrogant, imperious man,
Perfection so exclusive? are thy powers
Nearer approaching Deity? Can'st thou solve
Questions which high Infinity propounds,
Soar nobler flights, or dare immortal deeds,
Unknown to woman, if she greatly dares
To use the powers assign'd her? Active strength,

³³ William Roberts, *Memoirs of the Life and Correspondence of Mrs Hannah More*, 3rd ed., 4 vols., (London: 1835), quoted in Duncan Wu, ed., *Romantic Women Poets: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1997), 151.

³⁴ Ann Yearsley, "On Mrs Montagu," in *Poems on Several Occasions* (London: T. Cadell, 1785), 101–06.

The boast of animals, is clearly thine;
By this upheld, thou think'st the lesson rare
That female virtues teach; and poor the height
Which female wit obtains.

(1-11)

As she addresses “imperious man,” Yearsley describes the division of the sexes as an issue of power and critiques patriarchal notions that women are fit for domestic duties while men are suited to perform hard labour or reach high standards of intelligence. Yet, by producing this piece of poetry, Yearsley boldly and actively displays her intelligence and opinions, in full validation of her strategy to include all in the literary community.

Her overall desire is to identify women writers as valuable members of the literary community. It is important to consider that by the time Yearsley was writing this poem, her relationship with More was becoming increasingly distressed. In his anthology of Romantic women’s poetry, Duncan Wu argues that “[t]he abrupt opening of this poem, with its challenging question, makes one wonder whether Hannah More might have shown its author Mary Scott’s *Female Advocate*, with its attack on anti-feminism.”³⁵ Wu’s suggestion can be contested for a number of reasons. Most likely, More did not show Scott’s poem to Yearsley. In her *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*, discussed earlier, More acquiesces to society’s acceptance of female inferiority and proposes that men can achieve a higher understanding than women. More admits that women’s lack of education contributes to this discrepancy. But, More would not have wanted to show Yearsley a text which was so much against More’s own beliefs. And, as Donna Landry points out, “More cannot countenance the move towards fracturing the ‘natural’ connection between literature and middle-class privilege that Yearsley’s independent pursuit of a literary

³⁵ Duncan Wu, ed., *Romantic Women Poets: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1997), 154.

career might bring about.”³⁶ Once again, More wants class distinctions to remain intact. It is ironic that Yearsley manages to publish her works considering that her patron’s “educational philosophy,” according to Linda H. Peterson, “insisted that women spend their time reading male authors rather than becoming authors themselves.”³⁷ Perhaps one of the reasons the working relationship between Yearsley and More failed was that More’s views of women’s education, her maintenance of class distinctions, and her desire to be a patron to Yearsley presented her with conflicts she could not readily resolve. Despite their ideological and class differences, More encouraged Yearsley to publish her writing, “for, though incorrect, they breathed the genuine spirit of Poetry.”³⁸

Yearsley believed that women should have opportunities similar to those afforded to men, regardless of class. Yet she does need the support of other women to gain greater access to the literary community she so greatly desires. Landry comments that “Yearsley insists upon her difference from her patrons in class, education, and culture, while thanking them for their support.”³⁹ To adjust Landry’s observation, it might be argued that since Yearsley wishes to improve the accessibility of the literary culture, then her solution is to promote the notion of diversity rather than difference. As I stipulated in chapter one, difference implies exclusion and discord, while diversity encourages commonality. The diversity fostered within the literary community allows the working-class Yearsley and the privileged Montagu to work together. Although Yearsley is only a novice poet and Montagu is a respected figure within the literary community, they can both be considered literary women who

³⁶ Donna Landry, *The Muses of Resistance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 19.

³⁷ Linda H. Peterson, “Becoming an Author: Mary Robinson’s *Memoirs* and the Origins of the Woman Artist’s Autobiography,” in *Re-Visioning Romanticism*, ed. Joel Haefner and Carol Shiner Wilson (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 46.

³⁸ Hannah More, “A Prefatory Letter to Mrs. Montagu. By a Friend,” in *Poems on Several Occasions*, Ann Yearsley (London: T. Cadell, 1785), iv.

³⁹ Landry, 127.

have displayed their intelligence publicly. More, Montagu, and Yearsley are unique women from vastly different backgrounds and Yearsley chooses to approach their differences in terms of diversity, rather than discord, in order to claim successfully her space in the literary community.

Via the example of Montagu, her mentor, Yearsley uses her new-found privilege to reach the reading masses and present her argument that women are intelligent. Yearsley states that:

MONTAGU befriends
The puzzled thought, and, blazing in the eye
Of boldest Opposition, strait presents
The soul's best energies, her keenest powers,
Clear, vigorous, enlighten'd; with firm wing
Swift she o'ertakes *his* Muse,

(12–17)

Montagu is an intelligent woman possessing the ability to compete with even the “boldest Opposition.” When Montagu “befriends / ...thought,” she uses the powers of intelligence as an ally. The language is war-like as Yearsley describes Montagu’s strong stance against strident men as she mobilises her “energies” and “powers.” She possesses an intelligent sensibility, and the poetry that she is able to produce is simply better than what “*his* Muse” can create.

Consequently, Yearsley feels she must apologise to Montagu because the blank-verse format of Yearsley’s poem and her budding poetic abilities allow her only to describe Montagu’s “wisdom temper’d with the milder ray / Of soft humanity, and kindness bland”(31–32). Upon first glance, it seems as if Yearsley is being mildly self-critical. When Yearsley recalls her emergence onto the literary scene, she uses the image of a figurative mountain and describes Montagu’s predominance thus:

So wide its influence, that the bright beams
Reach the low vale where mists of ignorance lodge,

Strike on the innate spark which lay immers'd,
Thick-clogg'd, and almost quench'd in total night –
(33–36)

So strong is Montagu's influence that it can awaken hidden talents. Presumably, Yearsley alludes to her own previous condition when she refers to "the low vale where mists of ignorance lodge." Her poetic "spark," or inspiration, was then "immers'd, / ...in total night." Yet Yearsley's confidence as a poet returns as she remembers how fortunate she is to have Montagu as her mentor. However, Yearsley does not forget to mention the efforts of her patron More, for it is through More that Yearsley is able to meet Montagu. She is grateful for this fortuitous opportunity "to clear my dull, imprison'd sense, / And chase the mists which dimm'd my visual beam"(49–50). Yearsley acknowledges that without the help of both women, she would have remained in "want of powers to speak"(63).

Therefore, it is appropriate that Yearsley chooses to thank her mentor in a poem showcasing her own poetic abilities. In the last nine lines of the poem, she graciously recognises Montagu's guidance and refers to herself in the third person as "LACTILLA"(70), in reference to her days as a milkmaid. She describes herself as having an empty soul before Montagu, "the bright Moralist"(71), befriended her. Yet it is in the last four lines of the poem where Yearsley's more positive thoughts are most touchingly conveyed. She states that Montagu was able to "Woo the abstracted spirit"(76) in Yearsley's soul. But, it is Montagu's caring spirit toward Yearsley that truly affects her. Montagu "gently"(77) eased her into the literary community where she at last found "scenes of peace"(77).

It is this reference to writing as a calming force in her life that best articulates Yearsley's commitment to the art. Yearsley, in the true sense of female community, not only describes her previous harsh life and her transformation, but she also

emphasises her appreciation for all of More's and Montagu's help. Although Yearsley considers society's influence as a limiting force in the literary culture, she finds that it is a community that fosters diversity and wellbeing. Yearsley is truly "grateful"(78) to have a female mentor in the literary community to which she now belongs. Her heart "breathes its thanks in rough, but timid strains"(79) as it acquires the coveted "powers to speak"(63) in verse.

Connections with Writers

Intellectual groups like the Bluestocking Circle and relationships between writers and their patrons and mentors helped women like Yearsley to enter the literary community successfully. However, as Barbauld's letter shows, Barbauld believes that care must be taken when entering into a literary community. Women writers should not, in Barbauld's opinion, be presented in a journal just because they are women. Attention should be given to creating a literary community in which the social markers of one's identity are considered as notable as their gender. She goes as far as to name several women writers with whom she would object to being grouped—possibly because of her Dissenting beliefs—and proposes that Hannah More would reject the association all the same. From her statements against the journal offered by Edgeworth and her father, a larger argument may be inferred for a more precise community of writers, especially as it relates to forming one in which women have a key and decisive role.

This ideological component of the structure of literary community is exemplified in the community of Warrington Academy, Barbauld's relationships with its members, and her attitude toward her writing. Warrington, a coterie of Dissenting intellectuals organised by the Aikin family, provided a dynamic atmosphere of family

intimacy and intellectual growth that was more than a mere gathering place for non-conforming members of the society. On the contrary, as Newlyn explains, "it was a family, a society of friends, an ideal community practising a fraternalist ethic, a centre in which current political issues were enthusiastically debated, and a thoroughfare for the traffic of radical ideas and publications."⁴⁰ Barbauld felt at ease among her family and peers at Warrington. She often found the community so accepting and safe that she would present her poetry to other members of Warrington before she offered it for publication.⁴¹ Indeed, "[n]ot only did the existence of coteries allow writers to circulate their work before it appeared in print...it also helped them to establish common aims, intentions, and prejudices; a shared and inevitably exclusive language; and strongly cohesive loyalties."⁴²

Yet a woman risked chance associations when she joined the literary culture; she could not accurately control, in Barbauld's fashion, the ideological components of her intellectual environment. Although Barbauld wished to belong to a defined learned community, and indeed did participate in the intellectual environment of Warrington, she was still concerned about her work appearing alongside that of others who did not share her same beliefs or degree of literary accomplishment. While Barbauld shuddered at an alliance with Hannah More, More expressed similar concerns about her associations with others. In a letter to Marianne Thornton, More unmistakably declares her fears that her connections and comments on others may have undesirable consequences. Her resulting paranoia causes her to suggest that her friend drastically dispose of their letters to one another: "I shall wish you to write a label in my letters To be burnt after your death....I conclude (for I have not yet had

⁴⁰ Newlyn, 137.

⁴¹ See Daniel E. White, "The 'Joineriana': Anna Barbauld, the Aikin Family Circle, and the Dissenting Public Sphere," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 32, no. 4 (1999): 519.

⁴² Newlyn, 24.

time to look over my own) that there may be many remarks and opinions which I should not wish to fall into other hands.”⁴³ More did not want her private opinions or comments about other members of the literary community to be publicly revealed, even after her death. According to Barbauld, however, publication and involvement in the literary community inevitably risked, maybe even required, some social amalgamation. She acknowledges in her letter that “different sentiments & different connections” create variety and help authors associate with others in the literary community.

Literary Friendship with a Man: Community and Feeling

In her untitled poem referred to as “To a young Gentleman”(1770), Priscilla Pointon illustrates that women’s feelings could inspire, persuade, or even instigate connections to the literary community.⁴⁴ Pointon counters a male friend’s assessment of her verse as lacking in feeling. His cutting remarks only serve to inspire her to compile her verse for subscription as she endeavours to assimilate with the literary community. Through the example of a fruitless literary friendship with a man, her poem confronts and interprets the significance of women in the literary community in terms of the use and effect of feeling. Indeed, female poets used sensibility both to offer unique and powerful responses to the world around them, as explained in chapter two, and to elucidate their particular circumstances as women in the literary community. Pointon (c.1740–1801), a blind widow living in poverty, frequently circulated her work in the hopes of securing subscriptions.⁴⁵ Perhaps her sad situation

⁴³ Hannah More to Marianne Thornton, 21 February, 1815, MY 716, The Huntington Library.

⁴⁴ Priscilla Pointon, “The following to a young gentleman...,” in *Poems on Several Occasions* (Birmingham: T. Warren, 1770), 39–41.

⁴⁵ Roger Lonsdale, ed., *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 272–73.

motivated the insistent, emotional, but confident tone which is sustained throughout her poem.

Pointon starts by informing her readers about the events that caused her to pen her text:

The following to a young Gentleman, who, after a long correspondence with the Author, in poetic strain, voluntarily offer'd (when she publish'd) to return all those lines she had so obligingly favour'd him with; and he coming to see her a few months after she had begun her subscription, earnestly requested him to perform his promise, to which he then shewed some reluctance; but after a short pause, he sneeringly reply'd, That in a few days she might depend on him sending back all her *empty* Verse, as he was then pleased to phrase it: but not being just to his word, she addressed him in the following manner.⁴⁶

Pointon's male friend, who at one point supported and encouraged her poetry, has betrayed and disappointed her by ultimately deeming her works as "*empty*." Her use of italics serves to highlight the remark that she considered most adverse and to emphasise her deep concern over his comment that her verse is devoid of feeling. In this short prose introduction, she portrays this young man as false, disdainful, and unfaithful. Because he is described as a disloyal friend, the reader can infer that his derogatory responses are specious and Pointon's verse is indeed full of emotion.

Certainly, she views his remark as a personal attack on her private works that she is preparing for publication. From her opening explanatory notes, it seems as if her male friend has shattered her confidence upon the commencement of her literary career. On the contrary, the following poetic response to her friend's comments shows Pointon to be a strong and determined woman, confident of her strengths as a female writer to ward off his negative comments and to continue to write. If

⁴⁶ Pointon, 39.

anything, the criticism of her male correspondent motivates Pointon to end her ineffective literary friendship, heed the advice of her female muse, and follow her poetic aspirations.

The first few lines of the poem display a sarcastic and bitter tone:

Though rare you're just, now to your word be true;
If back to me my nonsense you'll restore,
In verse, nor prose, I'll you offend no more:
Too oft for you I've tun'd my artless lyre,
In hopes your soul with virtue to inspire,
Such as the brave esteem and wife admire.

(4–9)

In the past, her friend seemed to be an encouraging and amicable ally. Now, it seems she must end their friendship because he is not supportive of her. She receives his comments as an indication that her work is “nonsense” and “artless,” and even though she tried to connect with him through “virtue,” “esteem,” and “admir[ation],” her attempts have been fruitless.

In fact, she informs him that the last time she composed a “friendly strain”(12) to him, she heard her muse advise against it. Even her muse portrays Pointon's male friend in a disapproving light, calling him “ignoble,” “a stranger to both truth and sense,” and a “Slave to vain glory, and to arrogance”(15–17). The muse urges Pointon to “No longer let him then thy Muse profane, / But for some nobler youth hence dress thy theme”(23–24). The muse does not want Pointon to correspond with this foolish and uncaring man who is merely a “Coxcomb”(30) who “to thy sex does ever prove a foe”(31). Yet her muse does not prohibit her association with men altogether. Instead, the muse suggests that Pointon should seek a “nobler youth” to appreciate her verse: a man who can express “extacy,” “modesty,” “gratitude,” and “friendship”(25–28).

At first, Pointon responds to her muse with shock and disbelief: "Thus spoke it ceas'd, whilst I, like one amaz'd, / Silent as night, all statue struck, I gaz'd. / Say then, O say what can this riddle mean!"(34–36). She does not respond by merely rejecting her old friend and finding another. This concession would prove too timid for Pointon. Alternatively, she realises that she must complain and convey her thoughts to her friend, mockingly, in a poem. It is this act of protest against his bitter criticism of her work that signifies her belief in her abilities as a poet and which will prove to him convincingly her capacity to express emotion: "But I disdain what you can say or do, / Your praise I scorn, nor fear your frowns, it's true"(44–45). Additionally, she does not need the support of a man to succeed as a writer. Triumphantly, she marks the end of her friendship with this unappreciative man and begins her journey as a woman poet with a clearly emotional work.

Indeed, as Pointon's work helps to show, the expression of feelings was vital to a woman's relationships with others in the literary community. In Pointon's case, although her male friend initially proved to be supportive of her poetry, his failure to recognise her potential as a poet caused the confident and emotional Pointon to speak out in verse. Pointon and her muse recognised the importance of expressing herself within her poetry in order to maintain a vital connection with others. For Pointon, emotions, rather than a literary friendship, made stronger ties to the literary community.

"Imagined" Connections in the Literary Community

However, not all women writers were associated with an explicit form of literary community such as patronage, coteries, or literary friendship. For these women outside of a more definite association, it was just as important to establish

community and create connections with others in the literary culture. Helen Maria Williams, in her poem “An Address to Poetry”(1790; 1823), constructs community through the inspiration of writers and implicit connections with readers. Williams’s situation, at the time of the poem, was in turmoil as she travelled between war-torn France and her native Britain. Her poem, and its conception of a literary community, may suggest that her separation from her friends and family created a longing for connections with others. Benedict Anderson’s work, *Imagined Communities*, provides a useful way of understanding Williams’s model of literary community.

In his account of the establishment of community and the growth of a nation, Anderson argues that the nation can be considered “an imagined political community....It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”⁴⁷ Anderson stipulates that literature represents this type of community because it disseminates information and allows readers to think of themselves in new ways as they relate to others through the act of reading. Readers may not personally know the author of a specific work, but they acquire communal information by reading the same piece of literature. This link between readers which is established through literature—and more specifically through the novel and the newspaper in Anderson’s study—is parallel to the imagined community of the nation. In Anderson’s estimation, community is representative of shared thoughts and ideas; it is a sense that people relate to each other through common knowledge.

In “An Address to Poetry,” Williams emphasises the importance of inspiration and consequently establishes an “imagined community” within the literary

⁴⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition (London: Verso, 1991), 6.

culture.⁴⁸ Williams reveals her thoughts on her emotional occupation as a writer, the powers of her muse, and the innate sense of inspiration that readers feel as they read the works of past literary figures. Poetry is a powerful art and poets possess a coveted ability to communicate. Yet the pursuit of poetry is not necessarily a joyful experience and can be fraught with moments of deep distress. However, when one reads other writers' literary works, one can find great inspiration. In this poem, Williams presents poetry as an emotional and lasting art, establishes a community of readers, and reinforces the canon.

To Williams, poetry is an enticing medium of expression for there are "envious crowds" who look to "the summit"(1). By placing the realm of poetry atop a mountain, Williams implies that it is located in proximity to the heavens and occupies an important place in the literate world. The "envious" people who have gathered to ascend the literary mountain are gathering in "crowds." Many wish to attempt this arduous journey, yet remain at the bottom, unable to achieve their goal. Williams warns that in the process of becoming a poet, one encounters "Danger," "Ambition," "Pale Av'rice," "selfish passions," and enough negative emotions to "make fond Nature's best emotions vain"(2-8).

However, these harsh words prove the only warnings Williams gives to those who wish to pursue poetry. Throughout the rest of the poem, Williams expresses her belief that poetry is a blessing and one thing in her life that truly brings her happiness: "Blest Poesy! O, sent to calm / The human pains which all must feel, / Still shed on life thy precious balm"(89-91). In honour of her art, and to exemplify the positive responses poetry encourages, she subsequently conveys these latter feelings in the remainder of her poem.

⁴⁸ Helen Maria Williams, "An Address to Poetry," in *Poems on Various Subjects* (London: G. and W.B. Whittaker, 1823), 3-17.

The second stanza provides a summation of the images and feelings which dominate the majority of the work. Like in her poem “To Sensibility” in the “Address to Sensibility” genre, Williams mentions the control of emotions, the physical effects of poetry, and the joy poetry brings to those who are blessed by it:

O POESY! O nymph most dear,
To whom I early gave my heart,--
Whose voice is sweetest to my ear
Of aught in nature or in art;
Thou, who canst all my breast controul,
Come, and thy harp of various cadence bring,
And long with melting music swell the string
That suits the present temper of my soul.

(9-16)

The expression “O POESY!” and the exclamation point lend a dramatic introduction to the stanza, as she greets the nymph of poetry as a valued friend. Now, after being bombarded by negative descriptions only a few lines ago, the reader learns what positive emotions Williams feels as her admiration of poetry swells in line after line. In fact, Williams considers the nymph her inspiration and guide, admitting that it maintains “the present temper of my soul.” Indeed, the influence of poetry was invariably potent in her life:

When did my fancy ever frame
A dream of joy by thee unblest?
When first my lips pronounc'd thy name,
New pleasure warm'd my infant breast.

(25-28)

Yet Williams’s engagement with literature extends beyond just her connection to poetry and her relationship with her muse. She broadens her view of the literary community by acknowledging other writers. She credits Shakespeare, not necessarily as a model for her own writing, but as a supplementary source of inspiration within the literary community:

Thy page, O SHAKESPEARE! let me view,
Thine! at whose name my bosom glows;

Proud that my earliest breath I drew
In that blest isle where SHAKESPEARE rose!

(49–52)

Williams states that at the mere mention of Shakespeare's name, her "bosom glows." This reaction is reminiscent of her previous statement in line thirteen about the nymph being able to control her "breast." The response that she experiences when she discusses poetry is internalised within her bosom, the very core of her sensibility. As Williams breathes in air, she also feels a creative influence. Isobel Armstrong, in an intricate discussion of inspiration in Victorian poetry, emphasises a similar sense of these essential creative, emotional, and physical responses when she argues that an inhalation can be seen as "an 'influence', a flowing in, the air of the environment which sustains life."⁴⁹

Additionally, Shakespeare serves as an important point of common knowledge in the "imagined community" of the literary culture. Howard Anderson and Irvin Ehrenpreis make a similar observation about literary references to widely-known works or authors: "most of the writers of the period pay their readers the compliment of assuming that literary allusions will be recognized; thus the frequent quotations and allusions imply an awareness of reading—even of a culture—shared."⁵⁰ Therefore, through her reference to Shakespeare, Williams begins to construct a literary community by locating readers who share similar emotive responses to a prominent literary figure and his work.

Williams also mentions the work of Milton, Homer, Thomson, and Pope and constructs a more complex community. Newlyn finds Williams's use of past literary

⁴⁹ Isobel Armstrong, "A Music of Thine Own: Women's Poetry—an Expressive Tradition?" in *Victorian Women Poets: A Critical Reader*, ed. Angela Leighton (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1996), 254.

⁵⁰ Howard Anderson and Irvin Ehrenpreis, "The Familiar Letter in the Eighteenth-Century: Some Generalizations," in *The Familiar Letter in the Eighteenth Century*, eds. Howard Anderson, Philip B. Daghlain, and Irvin Ehrenpreis (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1966), 279.

figures most important in terms of her role as a reader in the literary world because Williams “does not identify them as models for her own poetic utterance, but instead assigns them the more ambiguous role of inspirational voices, with whom she communes as a reader.”⁵¹ Although Williams may not consider these men to be forces of inspiration for her own writings, her intellectual connection with them extends beyond her role as a reader. Through these references, Williams, like the poet Mary Scott, also reinforces the tradition of the literary canon. Newlyn scarcely addresses this point when she further states that “[i]n tracing a continuity between these disparate poetic identities, Williams figures the literary past as a preparation for the poetry of sensibility, a genre to which her own text belongs.”⁵² Here, Newlyn focuses away from Williams’s prominent acknowledgement of a community of writers and the canon and, instead, stresses the impact of historical reference on genre. But, in writing her praise of these literary works within her own poem, Williams clearly develops another sense of literary community.

Williams’s adulation of these intellectual men is quite clear. But, in the last three stanzas, she argues that the muse of Nature inspires all to write lasting verse:

Can Fame on Painting’s aid rely?
Or lean on Sculpture’s trophy’d bust? –
The faithless colours bloom to die,
The crumbling pillar mocks its trust;
But thou, Oh Muse, immortal maid!
Canst paint the godlike deeds that praise inspire,
Of worth that lives but in the mind’s desire,
In tints that only shall with Nature fade!

(209–216)

⁵¹ Newlyn, 254.

⁵² Ibid. Note that Newlyn’s reference to the “poetry of sensibility” as “a genre” is substantially different from my own assertion of the existence of the particular “Address to Sensibility” genre discussed in the previous chapter. Newlyn uses the term “poetry of sensibility” as an imprecise signification of those works which place heightened emotion at the forefront of their argument, like Williams’s “Address to Poetry.” Newlyn refers to these types of works as a “genre” to emphasise their prevalent use of emotion. This is unlike my own analytical aim to classify and study poems that particularly and directly explore the various interpretations and applications of sensibility.

One's heart possesses the valuable "flame" of inspiration. In this description of the inspirational powers of the muse and nature, nature is not only nurturing, but also works in tandem with the muses to inspire artists.⁵³ Perhaps these lines suggest that Williams believes that poetry is a blessing in her life even though she may never understand why or how she is empowered and emotionally guided by it. Therefore, her poetry is written to give praise to her "partial nymph"(217) and to tell of the inspirational works of other writers.

Williams recognises that she is artistically nourished because of her muse and is emotionally captivated by other works of literature. In all, her references to past male writers is evidence that she physically, emotionally, and intellectually feels a part of the literary community. Indeed, Williams builds several layers of an "imagined community" within her poem through her descriptions of other writers' powers of inspiration. Consequently, she connects with readers who share a similar intellectual knowledge, reinforces the history of the canon, and establishes herself as part of the literary community.

In summary, in order to associate with other writers in the literary culture of the Romantic period, women writers negotiated several different forms of community. One model of community expressed within Ann Yearsley's poem was the personal relationship between mentors and patrons. Yearsley's relationships with More and Montagu exemplify this type of literary community. Alternatively, the establishment of groups of writers and intellectuals such as the Warrington Academy, who could

⁵³Anne Mellor, in a discussion of feminine Romanticism, proclaims that nature was not a root of inspiration so much as a powerful source of caring in conflicted times. She states that nature is "not a source of divine creative power so much as a female friend or sister with needs and capacities, one who both provides support and requires cultivation, with whose life-giving powers one willingly cooperates." *Romanticism and Gender* (London: Routledge, 1993), 209. Interestingly, in the Williams's poem here written at the height of Romanticism, it is the inspiration of the muse and nature that Williams finds so comforting.

review and build support for a work before its publication, helped women like Barbauld to connect with others and establish community. Although one of Pointon's literary relationships proved unsuccessful, her model of community emphasises the importance of expressing emotion. Even though she countered her friend's harsh claims that her works lacked feeling by writing a poem that served to end their friendship, she informs the reader that her Muse encouraged her to seek friendship with a man who could appreciate her emotional works. Finally, Williams constructed within her poem yet another form of literary community, one which was much less concrete. In Williams's estimation, readers could be inspired and associations created just through the production and exchange of literary works. To apply Anderson's concept, these "imagined communities" of writers and readers, through the written word, established a much larger literary connection. Under Williams's model, the literary community could extend to all who wished to join.

MAINTAINING DIVERSITY: APPROACHING THE LITERARY COMMUNITY

As I explained in chapter one, the notion of difference implies separation and disagreement whereas diversity supports differences with the aim of locating commonality. Virginia Blain identifies that a somewhat perplexing "dilemma faced by any female artist in a patriarchal culture...[is] to develop her difference from other women, but also to keep her commonality with them."⁵⁴ However, what Blain terms a "dilemma," I see as an advantageous goal for Romantic women poets in terms of the formation of a literary community which emphasises diversity. It is acknowledged that gender differences, especially in terms of "feminine" feeling, granted women

⁵⁴ Virginia Blain, "Women poets and the challenge of genre," in *Women and Literature in Britain 1800–1900*, ed. Joanne Shattock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 167.

some social advantage which they utilised, in part, to mediate between the public and private spheres. However, if women writers were to join the literary community successfully, then they ultimately had to reinforce its dual-gendered and diverse nature and share the literary community with their male counterparts rather than form a separate community based on gender differences. Therefore, in terms of forming literary community, the affirmation of diversity does not present a dilemma for women writers, but rather supports a model of community which is advantageous.

Even though women writers looked to others for support and perhaps even empathy, it is important to bear in mind that their aim was to integrate and offer diversity, not to diverge and create a separate literary community, as Edgeworth's letter would suggest. This commitment to diversity is most clearly seen in "On the Fate of Newspapers"(1814) by Isabella Lickbarrow; "An Address to the Muses"(1790) by Joanna Baillie; and "A Poem, on the Supposition of an Advertisement Appearing in a Morning Paper, of the Publication of a Volume of Poems, by a Servant-Maid"(1789) by Elizabeth Hands.

Lickbarrow and Baillie highlight the challenge to create an atmosphere based on creative amalgamation, yet establish one which allows writers to retain a sense of individuality. Their poems address the concern of literary association through discussions of poetic inspiration. Lickbarrow's poem extends Helen Maria Williams's argument for the inspiration of readers through the works of male writers by arguing for the influence of previous literary works on future writers. Baillie's poem complicates Williams's and Lickbarrow's discussions of literary influence and association by exploring the theme of gender. For Hands, the diversity of the literary culture became her strategy for joining the literary community. In her discussion of the bias of the society in terms of class, Hands both expresses a common reference to

the struggles of working-class women and discusses that contention in terms of its effect on her as a working-class poet. Her poem asserts difference, finds commonality, and therefore reinforces diversity. Indeed, women poets asserted diversity and strengthened the literary community by finding points of commonality with other writers and readers, while maintaining a personal perspective.

Inspiring Writers

According to Lickbarrow in her poem "On the Fate of Newspapers," words are impermanent entities which may have inspirational powers.⁵⁵ In the poem, she loses faith in the stability of the printed word, only to find hope again in the thought that poetic inspiration may be rekindled. Although the ultimate destruction of a newspaper cannot be prevented, Lickbarrow suggests that writers must not dwell on the fact that their words may be destroyed, but alternatively should be motivated to write again. Inspiration is achieved through one's connections with others and the written word. Similar to Williams in that she looks to other literatures to find inspiration, Lickbarrow extends Williams's argument by focusing on the influence of works upon other writers, rather than readers. In essence, as it argues for the reincarnation of literature, Lickbarrow's poem is at once sad but inspiring.

The medium of print is described by Lickbarrow as "valu'd, highly priz'd"(3). In an admission that readers anxiously await the morning newspaper, she connects with others: "Fresh from the Mint not long ago, / We welcom'd with abundant pleasure, / Impatient for the mighty treasure"(8-10). Lickbarrow places value in the written word and, more specifically, in the newspapers that provide information to the

⁵⁵ Isabella Lickbarrow, "On the Fate of Newspapers," in *Poetical Effusions* (Kendal: M. Branthwaite and Co., 1814), 73-74.

reading public. Yet it seems the words on the page have less lasting power and use than the material on which they are written. People read the papers, discard them, or use them for other purposes: “‘T is now in scatter’d fragments torn, / Part wrapp’d around the kettle’s handle, / Part twisted up to light the candle”(12–14). It is as if the words die as “line after line expire”(16) in the flames of the burning candle.

Lickbarrow empathises with other writers who must see “their pains”(19) of accomplishment meet with such a swift termination after so much time and effort. She identifies with the work of “the poet’s brains”(20), the “antiquarian’s learning”(21), “the philosopher’s vast skill”(25) and exclaims, “To think that what such wits have penn’d, / Should come to this disgraceful end”(29–30). Indeed, Lickbarrow feels that the use of newspapers for every-day chores is disrespectful to the intellectuals who strive to extend their knowledge to others. In fact, this undeserving treatment of the written word should incite them to discontinue writing:

Why ‘t is enough to make them vow,
With aspect stern and frowning brow,
They’ll such an useless trade resign,
And never write another line.

(31–34)

However, Lickbarrow conceives of a way to invigorate writers. She feels that she can redeem the unfavourable end of the written word through the sharing of intellect and inspiration. Literary community, in Lickbarrow’s determination, is essential to the survival of knowledge. Perhaps the writings of these “good sirs” may have a “nobler fate”(35). When burned for other uses, suggests Lickbarrow, their works will produce stimulating fumes and inspire even a “dull heavy witless wight”(40) to pick up the pen. She is not concerned that the inspirational words of these intellectuals will be reborn in “an empty brain”(43), but is satisfied that the regeneration of words and thoughts can work to keep the written word alive. It is

perhaps troublesome that she only suggests that the work of male intellectuals can inspire other writers. However, she ends her poem on a positive note, comforting other writers, male and female, that “we’ll write and sing again”(44).

Focusing on Gender

Joanna Baillie, in her poem “An Address to the Muses,” reveals the subtle but disadvantageous immutability that she believes still exists in the literary culture.⁵⁶ Her main concern is the consistency to privilege one sex over the other, and this focus makes for an intriguing poem. As Baillie reminisces about poetry’s history, consequently connecting past generations of writers to her literary community, her tone is calm and gentle. Nevertheless, her discussion of the current poetic atmosphere is marked with sadness, doubt, and a lack of confidence about her place in the literary community. The negativity and the disadvantages that Baillie sees within the literary culture of the eighteenth century dishearten her.

Baillie (1762–1851) was a Scottish playwright and poet. She had a long and fulfilling life, living in Scotland as a child and London as an adult. Baillie, best known for her *Plays on the Passions*, became a popular and wealthy author in her eighty-nine years. Her “earnings from her writings equalled those of Sir Walter Scott in the early years of the nineteenth century, ...[and] she was hailed as a second Shakespeare and Scotland’s greatest playwright.”⁵⁷ Critic Jonathan Wordsworth believes that “Baillie is an exception” to his rule that female poets wrote amid personal hardship.⁵⁸ Although Baillie may have enjoyed a successful career and

⁵⁶ Joanna Baillie, “An Address to the Muses,” in *Poems* (1790; reprint, with intro. by Jonathan Wordsworth, Oxford: Woodstock Books, 1994), 73–81.

⁵⁷ Mary McKerrow, “Joanna Baillie and Mary Brunton: Women of the Manse,” in *Living By The Pen: Early British Women Writers*, ed. Dale Spender (London: Teachers College Press, 1992), 162.

⁵⁸ Wordsworth, intro to *Poems*, by Joanna Baillie, 10.

fulfilling life, her poem “An Address to the Muses” expresses her concerns about the literary community. It was published anonymously in her first volume entitled *Poems*.

Baillie’s poem begins with a familiar description of the home of the muses, located “on a lofty hill”(4). The muses are “tuneful Sisters of the lyre”(1) who watch over the poetic world from their place in the heavens. Baillie modestly addresses them when she states, “Fain would I sing of you, could I address ye right”(6). This humble remark indicates Baillie’s doubt about her ability to express her poetic voice, a quandary that she develops later in the poem. The power of the muses is ancient, indicating that their influence has affected poets for many ages. In fact, it is this promise of the muses’ guidance that Baillie claims captures a poet’s heart: “The poet’s spirit inly burn’d, / And still to you his upcast eyes were turn’d”(11–12). In the first two stanzas, Baillie’s respect for the traditions of her art is clear. Not surprisingly, the muse is the powerful figure of guidance that directs poets along their artistic journeys.

Within this traditional representation of the realm of poetry, Baillie concedes to the common assumptions that the poet is a male figure and the muse is female. She continues to describe the male poet’s world, however, before she expresses the confusion she feels in her own. The contrasting descriptions serve to accentuate the differences she sees between herself and the gifted poet. Baillie insightfully describes the relationship of the female muse and the male poet. Although she admits that the days of temples, Gods, and heroes are gone, the ritual of summoning the muse continues: “Tho’ rolling ages now are past, / ... Your fading honours still remain, / And still your vot’ries call, a long and motley train”(31–36). For Baillie, this is an age where there exists a private, more isolated aspect to calling one’s muse.

Her description of the poet's artistic process is remarkably intimate:

The youthful poet, pen in hand,
All by the side of blotted stand,
In rev'rie deep, which none may break,
Sits rubbing of his beardless cheek;
And well his inspiration knows,
E'en by the dewy drops that trickle o'er his nose.

(49–54)

Baillie creates a somewhat voyeuristic experience for the reader. The reader is witness to a private ritual, a type of personal creative experience that does not warrant a companion. However, the description is affectionately humorous as Baillie details the poet's creative process. Her gentle ridicule of the poet is light-hearted, although it mocks the poet's work habits. Yet Baillie may be just like the poet that she describes. The poet is "youthful" with a "beardless cheek." While this may not describe Baillie in particular, it is a rather androgynous and general description that could be her. (One must not forget that Baillie wrote this volume of poetry anonymously.) The account of the poet's concentration is quite vivid, and perhaps signifies that Baillie at least identifies with the alienation and the separation from others that poets often endure.

Baillie's next revelation strongly shows her disappointment with the literary community: "O lovely sisters! well it shews / How wide and far your bounty flows: / Then why from me withhold your beams?"(67–69). Baillie uses the expression "sisters"(67) in an effort to connect with the female figures of the literary community. However, she feels that they have neglected her as a poet. She even questions if she is the only writer not to have received their guidance: "is it true, / That they are all inspir'd by you?"(61–62). She has genuine doubts about the muses' influence on her: "Whene'er I aim at heights sublime, / Still downward am I call'd to seek some

stubborn rhyme”(71–72). Baillie expresses her frustration at trying to become a successful writer in what she sees as a biased literary world.

As Mary McKerrow asserts, “[l]ike so many other women writers of her time, Baillie experienced the contradictions inherent in being a woman *and* a writer (and as an intellectual writer, one who dealt with human passions in the poetic and dramatic form, she was a writer who trespassed on the traditional territory of men).”⁵⁹ She describes her dilemmas as a female poet in the following lines:

No hasty lightning breaks the gloom,
Nor flashing thoughts unsought for come,
Nor fancies wake in time of need;
I labour much with little speed;
And when my studied task is done,
Too well, alas! I mark it for my own.

(73–78)

As Baillie sees it, her experiences do not equal those of her male counterpart. Her inspiration does not come forth in flashes of thought, nor does her muse provide much assistance. Writing is like labour in which she feels she does not excel.

Baillie’s frustration with the literary culture is clear; she feels ill at ease within its community. Yet she remains untroubled by some of the creative practices of poetry. For example, she is fairly accepting of the new relationship between the muse and poet. Emphatic communication with one’s muse is no longer involved; alternatively, a writer is now privately aware of the powers of inspiration. However, Baillie feels that gender boundaries still remain. Unlike her male counterpart, she is uninspired and she cannot express her emotions so peacefully and easily. This unevenness in the creative process and acceptance in the literary community trouble her.

⁵⁹ McKerrow, 161.

“An Address to the Muses” serves to resolve Baillie’s relationship with the muses rather than praise them for their powers of inspiration. Although she expresses disappointment, Baillie is able to come to terms with her negative feelings: “Yet should you never smile on me, / And rugged still my verses be; / ...I’ll lift my heart to you, and sing your praise”(79–84). Although she may be content to accept that she may experience hardships as a writer, Baillie still lacks self-assurance: “Your wild obscuring heights to brave, / Is boon, alas! too great for me to crave”(143–44). For the reader, as well as Baillie, it is hard to learn of her loss of confidence. One cannot help but agree with her that the difficulties she feels in sharing a creative space with men have dampened her positive, assertive attitude to poetry.

In these two poems by Lickbarrow and Baillie, the emphasis falls on women’s attempts to join the literary community alongside their male counterparts. Baillie’s and Lickbarrow’s main goal is not to compete with their fellow female poets for space in the literary community, but to belong to that diverse community with success and acceptance alongside male and female authors alike. Their visions, like Barbauld’s, follow a model based on an amalgamation of the sexes which retains one’s sense of particular identity. Furthermore, as these poets intimate, the integration of women writers into this developing literary community was not comfortably achieved.

Overcoming Differences?: The Barrier of Class

Working-class poet Elizabeth Hands (fl. 1789) worried about her social circumstances in relation to her role as a poet. She worked as a maidservant and moved to Coventry after her marriage. Although her volume was subscribed to in great numbers, she never rose above the working-class.⁶⁰ In “A Poem, on the

⁶⁰ Grace Isobel Clark, “Hands, Elizabeth,” in *A Dictionary of British and American Women Writers 1660–1800*, ed. Janet Todd (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1984), 149–150.

Supposition of an Advertisement Appearing in a Morning Paper, of the Publication of a Volume of Poems, by a Servant-Maid”(1789), Hands addresses the issue of the separation of the classes as an obstacle faced by working-class writers in a world controlled by the middle class.⁶¹ Her poem discusses the appropriateness of themes, education, and the place of servants in the society through the construction of an overheard conversation at a tea party in her employer’s house. Although Hands uses biting descriptions to comic effect, her pessimism and negativity about her possibility for success in the literary culture remains the primary focus throughout.

At the party, the two classes are separated by the activities they perform. The servant maid prepares the tea and sets the table while the guests merely sit and enjoy themselves. Hands humorously labels the guests by their strongest character traits, such as “Miss Flounce,” “lady Marr-joy,” “Miss Rhymer,” and “Mrs. Domestic.” These amusing, though judgmental, names suggest that the middle-class women have no redeeming traits and that the reader should regard their comments with little worth. The reader is privy to a conversation that is taking place among the ladies:

He, he, he, – says Miss Flounce; I suppose we shall see
An Ode on a Dishclout – what else can it be?
Says Miss Coquettilla, why ladies so tart?
Perhaps Tom the Footman has fired her heart;
And she’ll tell us how charming he looks in new clothes,
And how nimble his hand moves in brushing the shoes;
(13–18)

Apparently, Miss Flounce believes that because a servant wrote the verses, they must be about domestic duties. Although Miss Coquettilla points out that the poems could be about love, her remarks are merely another satiric introduction to the prejudiced views against the working-class.

⁶¹ Elizabeth Hands, “A Poem, on the Supposition of an Advertisement Appearing in a Morning Paper, of the Publication of a Volume of Poems, by a Servant-Maid,” in *The Death of Amnon. A Poem. With an Appendix: containing Pastorals and other Poetical Pieces* (Coventry: N. Rollason, 1789), 47–50.

Moreover, Lady Marr-joy does not approve of a servant doing any activities other than the duties assigned to her: "For my part I think, says old lady Marr-joy, / A servant might find herself other employ"(21–22). The word "old" suggests that Lady Marr-joy is more traditional in her ways. She finds nothing amusing in the fact that a servant may be partaking in activities other than those required by her employer and she sees versifying as grounds for discharge. The younger Miss Rhymer, however, is more liberal in her beliefs and replies, "I protest / 'Tis a pity a genius should be so deprest!"(25–26). Her character's assigned name implies that she feels some affinity towards the servant who writes poetry, going so far as to claim that a "genius" is being restrained by such negative views.

However, another guest is not only doubtful that most servants can even read or write, but also thinks that they should stay within certain social boundaries:

Says old Miss Prudella, if servants can tell
How to write to their mothers, to say they are well,
And read of a Sunday the Duty of Man;
Which is more I believe than one half of them can;
I think 'tis much *properer* they should rest there,
Than be reaching at things so much out of their sphere.
(29–34)

The ladies are not just surprised at the prospect of a working-class author participating outside of her "sphere," but are concerned with the value of any possible subject of her poems: "What ideas can such low-bred creatures conceive, / Says Mrs. Noworthy, and laught in her sleeve"(27–28). One guest, Mrs. Domestic, would be satisfied if the poem contained a recipe because then "It might have been useful, again and again"(52).

Throughout the poem, members from both classes partake in their usual activities. The servants set the tables, serve the tea, and prepare the room for a card game while the ladies enjoy their social hour. Although Hands self-deprecatingly

refers to members of her own class as “low-bred creatures,” the remarks of the middle-class women ensure that the divisions between the classes prevail. Through the silly characterisations of the guests, readers witness the ignorance of the middle-class who believe that servants are only capable of writing about trivial subjects, if they are able to write at all. Hands sees the possibilities for literary success and personal respect as unachievable goals when class prejudice reigns in a society whose members refuse to look beyond social boundaries in order to see creative worth.

As the poems in this section show, women poets located several points of contention with the literary culture. They shared common concerns and anxieties, but approached the assimilation with the literary community in different ways:

Lickbarrow was determined to find inspiration for future writers in past literary works, Baillie disliked that the literary community was still biased against the female sex, and Hands had trouble reconciling her social status with her creative abilities. However, their various struggles testify to their shared unease with the changing literary culture. Their poems stand as their attempts to engage with the literary culture, assert their beliefs, and attest to the social differences in the literary community.

THE CRITICAL COMMUNITY

Reviews and Public Opinion

The literary culture was not only reliant on the successful associations and writings of its literary participants, but also rested on the dynamic network of critics and readers. Furthermore, the Reviews attempted to fashion the literary culture according to their own literary aims, goals for readers, desires of authors, and economic gains. As Frank Donoghue argues, “through their critical pronouncements,

the reviewers sought to create hierarchies of taste and mold habits of reading that they hoped would influence the book purchases of individuals and circulating libraries.”⁶² To extend his argument beyond its economic interpretation, Reviews, between their covers, attempted to form a type of literary community comparable in certain respects to the larger one to which it belonged and to the smaller ones it tried to represent and inform.

Michael Bell argues that in the early eighteenth century, “*The Spectator* (1711–1714), was a conscious attempt to create, through a realistically imagined model, an exemplary social community” based on the contributions of authors and in-house critics.⁶³ Similar findings relating to the genre of the Review and the establishment of a type of literary community can be substantiated. For example, Jon P. Klancher argues that the *Monthly Magazine* (1796–1842) did not define its ideal reader, but instead attempted to cater to a broad group of young men who could be captivated by the promise of intellectual radicalism.⁶⁴ The *Critical Review* (1756–1814), by contrast, was conceived as a barrier to the amalgamation of the classes. According to Frank Donoghue, this Review, aimed at an elite reading audience, served to maintain class boundaries.⁶⁵ Jean E. Hunter asserts in her study of *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, founded in 1731, that it addressed a larger demographic and presented its material accordingly, often aiming to represent both men and women.⁶⁶ Finally, as Shawn Lisa Maurer has argued, Eliza Haywood’s *Female Spectator*

⁶² Frank Donoghue, “Colonizing readers, Review criticism and the formation of a reading public,” in *The Consumption of Culture 1600–1800: Image, Object, Text*, eds. Ann Bermingham and John Brewer (London: Routledge, 1995), 55.

⁶³ Michael Bell, *Sentimentalism, Ethics and the Culture of Feeling* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), 17.

⁶⁴ See Jon P. Klancher, *The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790–1832* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 39.

⁶⁵ See Frank Donoghue, *The Fame Machine: Book Reviewing and Eighteenth-Century Literary Careers* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 25.

⁶⁶ See Jean E. Hunter, “The 18th-Century Englishwoman: According to the Gentleman’s Magazine,” in *Women in the 18th Century and other Essays*, eds. Paul Fritz and Richard Morton (Toronto: Samuel Stevens Hakkert and Co., 1976), 87.

(1744–46), while clearly a more feminine version of its model *Spectator*, “hinged on the relationship between, on the one hand, an increasing awareness of certain subjects as belonging to a ‘feminine’ realm in which women might reign supreme and, on the other hand, a masculine approbation that...also included extensive male participation.”⁶⁷

It could be argued that the Reviews of the period served as an appropriate model of the connection between author, critic, and reader—as an internal structuring of the literary community—since these participants were not only the creators of the literary culture, but were also partially responsible for its evolution. As the examples above show, the Reviews thought of themselves as deciding authorities about the appropriate, useful, and possible structure of the literary culture and aimed to establish some form of community.

Often, the Reviews would not just critique the work at hand, but would additionally provide for their readers comments on the general climate of the literary culture or advice for aspiring writers. Of course, once the initial hurdle of publication was overcome, a writer had then anxiously to await the critics’ responses and hope for a generous critique. In a critique of the 1802 edition of *Poems* by Amelia Opie, *The Edinburgh Review* opens with a sympathetic account of the distress a writer endures when publishing his work, and provides insight into a writer’s anxiety about the critical element of the literary community:

There are, probably, many of our readers, who, at some fortunate, or unfortunate moment of their lives, have been tempted to dip their pen in the fatal ink of publication, and who still remember the anxiety with which they looked forward to the reception of their first work....[T]here is a stage of authorship, in which reputation itself is felt as an evil. The young writer of a popular work, in coming

⁶⁷ Shawn Lisa Maurer, *Proposing Men: Dialectics of Gender and Class in the Eighteenth-Century English Periodical* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 213.

forward a second time to public notice, submits his powers of criticism, of which he has already exhausted the indulgence, and which now expects to applaud, rather than to forgive.⁶⁸

This reviewer believes that new writers dabble in “fatal ink” when they offer their works for public scrutiny. Discouragingly, even seasoned writers are not immune to the “evil” of criticism. In this reviewer’s opinion, criticism proves to be calamitous for readers, reviewers, and writers alike.

In the earlier part of the century, the *Monthly* and *Critical Reviews* were principal sources for gathering information on a work’s anticipated success or failure. Writers frequently consulted them to remain in communication with the rest of the literary community. Indeed, according to Donoghue, “[t]he popularity of these two journals was so considerable that many authors would routinely check them whenever they or someone they knew had just published a book.”⁶⁹ A letter from Eliza Tuite to her publishers Cadell and Davies exhibits this concern about a work’s public reception: “Lady Tuite requests Messrs Cadell + Davies will be so good to give her some information as to the Success of Her Book thitherto, + should be much oblig’d to them to send her down immediately Whatever Review makes mention of the Poems.”⁷⁰

Felicia Hemans also worried about her literary reputation and the reactions of her friends upon the publication of her works. She wrote to her publisher Thomas Cadell, urging him not to reissue her first unpolished volume of poetry: “both my

⁶⁸ *The Edinburgh Review*, no. 1, 1802, 113–114. Incidentally, in this critique of a female’s collection of verse, the reviewer signifies the “young author” who desires to publish as a male (“he”, “his”) when discussing the dangers of publication. However, note that the use of this excerpt here emphasises the anxiety of publication and not a critique of gender signification.

⁶⁹ Donoghue, *The Fame Machine*, 16.

⁷⁰ Eliza Tuite to Cadell and Davies, 2 November 1796, Montagu d.7, 127, Bodleian Library, Oxford University.

friends and myself would consider the re-appearance of the Volume to which you allude, and which was written at the Age of fourteen, so injurious to my present literary reputation, that I have earnestly to request no steps may be taken to reproduce it.”⁷¹ She bolsters her plea saying that not only will her reputation suffer, but even her friends would find its publication disagreeable. In other words, writers were aware and concerned about how the connections they made with others—especially through the critical community—were shaping the literary culture and their own reputations. Other female authors shared similar anxieties about literary critics and the public reception of their work, especially poets Mary Julia Young, Harriet and Maria Falconar, and Eliza Thompson.

To Publish or Not to Publish?

Publishing one’s work was a risky business for a woman writer, and even encouragement by another to publish one’s works did not ensure self-confidence. In “To a Friend, on His Desiring Me to Publish”(1798), Mary Julia Young expresses her fear that her writing will bring her unfavourable feelings and elicit adverse criticism.⁷² It is interesting that it is a man who encourages Young to publish, but that it is initially her own self-doubt that discourages her. Eventually, she reveals that the pressures of an androcentric world discourage her even more as a woman writer. Young, a relation of the poet Edward Young, came from a large family. Educated by her mother and living in London, she was a poet and novelist who struggled financially between the publications of her works. In fact, after her publishers’ bankruptcy, she applied to the Royal Literary Fund for assistance. She died in 1821

⁷¹ Felicia Hemans to Thomas Cadell, 5 July, n.d., rare book 137748, The Huntington Library.

⁷² Mary Julia Young, “To a Friend, on His Desiring Me to Publish,” in *Poems* (London: Minerva Press, 1798), 80–81.

having outlived six siblings and many cousins.⁷³

In her poem, Young worries that with an “artless Muse, and humble name”(1), she will not be able to “solicit public fame”(2), as if that is what she needs in her desperate situation. However, she informs her mentor that she writes for pleasure, either helping “To soothe a mind oppressed with pain”(4) or “To pass a cheerless hour away”(6). Although poetry evokes powerful, positive emotions, she fears that she will be too overcome with these feelings and her hubris will be her downfall:

Presumptuous, giddy, proud, elate,
Forgetting Icarus’ sad fate,
High on my treacherous plumage soar,
And fall, like him, to rise no more?

(9–12)

Her other fear is that she will not be well-received as a new and inexperienced woman writer:

Shall I, an unknown, untaught woman,
Expose myself to dread Reviews, –
To paragraphs in daily news?
To gall-dipp’d pens, that write one down, –
To Envy’s hiss, and Critic’s frown?

(14–18)

It is the power of “printers, editors, and devils”(19), otherwise known as the printers’ apprentices, to “change the high-rai’d expectation / To disappointment and vexation”(21–22). Yet Young could be referring to her mentor’s expectations and the fear of disappointing him. Either way, Young questions whether, as an informally-educated woman, she should be publishing in a world with “a thousand other evils”(20), although she declines to name what these might be. Regardless, the reader is left feeling ill at ease at the suggestion that the literary world is full of pernicious things. Young remains undecided at the end of her poem whether she should venture to publish her other work.

⁷³ “Young, Mary Julia,” in *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English: Women Writers from the Middle Ages to the Present*, ed. Virginia Blain et al., (London: B.T. Batsford Ltd., 1990), 1201.

Criticising the Critics

Although the Falconar sisters, Maria and Harriet, also find fault with the system of reviews and critics in the literary world, they do not doubt that they should publish, but instead choose to fight against the male-influenced literary community with their poem "A Prefatory Epistle" (1791). Little is known of the Scottish sisters who lived in London and may have been related to the poet William Falconar.⁷⁴ Due to limited information about the sisters, one biographer suggests "that the work of such promising young writers could have ended only because of their early deaths."⁷⁵ These teenage poets published only three volumes in all, but had the support of many prominent writers of the day including Ann Yearsley, Hannah More, and Helen Maria Williams. "A Prefatory Epistle" is a sarcastic account of a misogynist world and a unique call for change.⁷⁶ Their adoption of a critic's voice is a literary device which enables the sisters to express entertainingly the prevailing opinions of society while creating a forum for argument. The first stanza acts as the supposed dialogue from a critic, thus illustrating the views of the critical community, while the second stanza serves as a biting retort, offering the sisters' views as female writers.

The first stanza begins with a plea to the reading public not only to listen to, but also join ranks with, the supposedly inferior women: "STAY, gentle Child of Taste! whoe'er thou art, / Listen, for Mercy's sake, and take our part"(1-2). These opening lines appear to reflect insecurity and doubt about their own acceptance in the literary community. Yet they do not simply appeal for acceptance, but request "Mercy" when judging their work. The Falconars' seemingly demure attitude is purposefully

⁷⁴ "Falconar, Maria and Harriet," in *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English*, 353.

⁷⁵ Joyce Fullard, "Falconar, Harriet," in *A Dictionary of British and American Women Writers 1660-1800*, ed. Janet Todd (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1984), 117.

⁷⁶ Harriet and Maria Falconar, "A Prefatory Epistle," in *Poetic Laurels for Characters of Distinguished Merit* (London: J. Walter, 1791), ix-x.

and strategically exaggerated. Their initial pitiful tone is in sharp contrast to the one that follows, hence generating sympathy for the sisters and making the critics appear even harsher.

As the sisters assume the critic's voice, the tone changes from coy to abrasive. The Falconars remove the critic's human qualities and replace them with more beastly behaviours as he will "Threat," "kill," and "Growl o'er the title page"(4-5) and then hastily conclude that the women are foolish in pursuing poetry. Indeed, the animalistic critic cuttingly remarks that a woman should remain a domestic figure rather than aspire to be a writer: "What's here, Miss Flirt! / You'd better make a pudding – or a shirt; / Poetic Laurels! there's a pretty puff!"(5-7). Consequently, it is not surprising that the critic thinks that a woman

Tells an affected sentimental story,
Or prates in senseless rhymes of Fame and Glory.
These modern Sapphos are conceited creatures,
They sport their thoughts as others do their features;
(13-16)

According to him, these female literati mistakenly think that they have something distinctive to say. Yet the critic anticipates that his remarks might cause somewhat of a backlash, but not one that amounts to much. He nonchalantly and mockingly remarks, "Sure madness rages now with ev'ry woman"(9), as if women's desires to become valued members of the society are inane, all-too-common crusades and feminist concerns are merely superficial and fashionable.

In due course, the sisters use the recommendations and the reproachful comments of the critic as justification to counter the critical community's conceptions of women; the sisters retort in a sarcastic and satirising voice: "'Twere best would each young woman mend her life, / And learn to be a decent, careful wife. / There

goes my work”(19–21). The sisters jokingly suggest a solution and present it to the male critic and others like him:

Assist us, dear Messieurs—have you no friend,
Your sons, perhaps yourselves, to recommend;
Myself or sister, blest with such a mate,
Will quit ambition and the tuneful state;
Conform ourselves to be whate’er ye chuse,
And cease to plague you with the jabb’ring Muse;
(27–32)

The message at first seems clear: if the men find suitors who are appropriate for them, then the women will change. Yet their proposal is not as congenial as it may seem. They sarcastically claim that they will abandon their “ambition” and cease their existence in the “tuneful state” of poetry. These sacrifices are quite substantial, but are not intended as a sign of an easy surrender to the demands of the male-influenced, literary culture.

Rather, the Falconar sisters have wittingly informed the reader of the sexist views of the critical community. The words “plague” and “jabb’ring” illustrate the sisters’ feelings of irritation and aggravation about critics’ prevailing opinions. The words also accentuate their annoyance that poetry is still viewed as a useless endeavour for a woman. They manage one last retort before they conclude their satiric poem: “Nay, the last gleam of our poetic rays / Shall shine an Ode in Quarto to your praise”(33–34). The sisters triumphantly remain the spirited, poetic women that they strive to be. It is this final, bitter remark that proves the Falconars’ determination to prevail against the androcentric critical community and literary culture.

The Falconars have successfully exemplified the banal, antiquated beliefs of the literary culture through the satiric representation of a male critic’s thoughts and their own witty reply. As they call attention to this perceived bias against women writers, the sisters must present a negative view of their art and the critical

community. The dominant belief that women should remain quiet, private, and domestic figures is countered by the sisters' poem which expresses the view that women should have a voice. It is a convincing protestation for change, albeit a defensive, sarcastic, and confrontational one.

Supporting Women Writers

In order to avoid the type of public criticism that Young and the Falconars anticipated, Mary Ann Lamb encouraged her friend and fellow writer Mary Matilda Betham to let her brother Charles Lamb critique and correct Betham's poem before its publication. It is worth quoting Lamb's letter at length:

We have read your poem many times over with encreased interest and very much wish to see you to tell you how highly we have been pleased with it. May we beg one favor—I keep the manuscript in the hope that you will grant it—It is that, either now, or when the whole poem is completed, you will read it over with us—When I say with us of course I mean Charles.—I know that you have many judicious friends, but I have so often known my brother to spy out errors in a manuscript, which has passed through many judicious hands, that I shall not be easy if you do not permit him to look yours carefully through with you—and also you must allow him to correct the press for you....Should you feel nervous at the idea of meeting Charles in the capacity of a severe censor give me a line and I will come to you any where and convince you in five minutes that he is even timid, stammers and can scarcely speak for modesty and fear of giving pain when he finds himself placed in that kind of office.⁷⁷

In order to allay any fears Betham might have about Charles Lamb examining and criticising her writing, Mary Lamb describes her brother not in a harsh and disparaging light, but portrays him as a nervous reviewer afraid of hurting the feelings of a fellow writer. This promise of valuable help with her manuscript without any

⁷⁷ Mary Ann Lamb to Mary Matilda Betham, [c. 1815?], HM 12269, The Huntington Library.

negative consequence is what Mary Lamb hopes will convince her friend Betham not only to share her work with others, but also to have that work critiqued in a friendly environment before its publication.

Yet, according to Eliza Thompson in her poem “Addressed to the Critical Reviewers”(1787), women writers should not have to alter their works in order to appease harsh critics.⁷⁸ On the contrary, critics should encourage and support women writers who courageously publish their works despite their fear of public scrutiny. In the preface to her volume, Thompson “takes the Liberty of dedicating them [her poems] to the Public at large; rather chusing to submit them to their candid Criticism, than endeavour to impose upon their Understandings, by sheltering herself under the flattering Approbation of an Individual.” Although she apologises for “the Simplicity of the Style, the Author begs Leave to observe, that these Poems are intended as well for the Entertainment and Improvement of the unlearned, as for those of more extensive Reading.” Although so little is known of Thompson’s life, these comments suggest that she did have some education and was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to share her knowledge with others through the written word.

Thompson opens her poem with a description of a woman writer at the mercy of the critics:

To wait her doom, as fix’d by your decree,
Lo! at your bar, a trembling maiden see,
Who, self-convinc’d enough you’ll find to blame,
Implores your mercy only, seeks not fame.

(1–4)

The woman writer awaits her “doom” yet informs the critic that she is humble and does not wish for literary distinction but merely leniency from criticism. Thompson offers an insightful view of the literary culture and pleads that her verse may not

⁷⁸ Eliza Thompson, “Addressed to the Critical Reviewers,” in *Poems on Various Subjects* (London: Denew & Grant, 1787), 5–6.

conform with the literary expectations of the day. She states that her poem, her “homely rhyme”(9), lacks “language richly drest”(5) and an “elegance”(8) which often signify a good literary work. In order to recover poetry from “this brilliant age, / When metaphors swell the poetic page; / Where flowery language Judgment oft perverts”(11–13), Thompson follows a “strong propensity”(15) to express Nature “in her native dress”(16).

She suggests that her poetry expresses “the feeble efforts of an unfledg’d muse”(18). Although Thompson seems quite self-deprecating, her aim is certainly bold. In her desire to express nature in its most natural form, she offers that her untaught mind may best be able to express it. Because she feels that her poetic style is not valued in her day, she implores the critics to support her work: “To lead her forth, vouchsafe your friendly aid, / And kindly pardon all the faults she’s made”(21–22). In pleading with the critics for kind encouragement and support, she is not conceding weakness, but is catalysing change and diversity within the literary culture to accommodate her own poetical style and personal contribution.

Her plea to “shield her from th’undiscerning crew”(23) of harsh critics becomes a demand for change “for the sex’s sake”(26). Indeed, through her supplication to the critics, she not only gains acceptance of her own style, but also calls for change in the literary culture to accommodate the writings of all women. She does not demand “praises where no merit’s due, / But O, for once, forbear your censure too”(27–28). In other words, Thompson does not want the quality of literature to suffer because of generous criticism, but she does desire encouragement and support of women writers.

Conversely, one female author, Mary Russell Mitford, believes that criticism may be getting too soft on women writers. Her particular reference to the poems of

Anna Seward, while acknowledging their popularity, is fairly critical: "Would her poems have excited so much attention had they been published by a John or a Thomas instead of an Anna Seward? Is she not judged rather by the original indulgence to her sex than by the present ungallant impartiality of criticism? In a word is she not overrated?"⁷⁹

Women writers were often their fellow writers' worst critics.⁸⁰ Hester Lynch Piozzi, for example, wrote to her friend James Fellowes of her dislike of a fellow female author's work by humorously disparaging it. She wrote, "I have the Headach [sic] myself: caught perhaps by reading Mrs. Carter's Letters which tell of nothing else – and yet all our pale blue ladies here are saying how fine they are."⁸¹ With these underlined words, Piozzi emphasises her disagreement with the Bluestocking ladies who think that Carter's *Letters* are worthy of praise. Belonging to a respected and supportive intellectual group, in Piozzi's opinion, did not ensure literary praise or shield a member from criticism.

By choosing a particular literary work, a reader aligned him- or her-self with a particular contingent of the "imagined" reading population. As evidenced by the letters of Mitford and Piozzi, published works were not always widely received with generous criticism. Certainly, the poems of Young, the Falconars, and Thompson show that women poets were aware of the public scrutiny of their works even outside of their own literary communities. Yet, the disparate criticism of the reading population, and the promise of varied literatures as writers adjusted to the changing literary culture around them, ensured an interesting and thriving literary world.

⁷⁹ Mary Russell Mitford to Davenport, 22 September, 1814, MS 35341, British Library.

⁸⁰ See Cheryl Turner, *Living By the Pen: Women Writers in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 1992), 129.

⁸¹ Hester Lynch Piozzi to James Fellowes, 26 June, 1817, HM 6141, The Huntington Library.

CONCLUSION: THE DIVERSITY OF THE LITERARY COMMUNITY

For women, writing signified a way to negotiate the space between the public and private spheres, to belong to a literary community of men and women, and to express their struggles in the contemporary society. As explicated earlier, Barbault aberrantly resisted being considered a member of a figurative community or tradition of women writers which did not meet her approval. Besides, as Edgeworth's letter supports, a woman sought a favourable environment in which to produce her works, publish her writings, and participate in the literary culture. Close readings of several poetic works have exemplified that the literary culture was a heterogeneous place occupied in part by women who defined their literary lives in terms of the diversity that they could offer. Literature provided women writers with an "imagined community," a chance to express their opinions, and an opportunity to participate in the public society. Women poets emphasised diversity and association rather than contrast and separation.

This desire for community with the preservation of individuality formulates a different model of creativity from traditional definitions of Romanticism, especially as it relates to male writers who often wrote of their need to live in isolation in order to produce their art. William G. Rowland Jr. argues that "[t]he romantics produced a great literature because their activity as writers forced them to confront a general experience of their historical period: the feeling of being cut off from other people and from the social and historical processes that determine one's life."⁸² Although it seems as if Rowland might be discussing the struggles of Romantic *female* authors, he is indeed referring to *male* authors of Britain and the United States of America. To

⁸² William G. Rowland Jr., *Literature and the Marketplace* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 16.

male writers, the age of the literary culture demanded poetic difference, Romantic dissatisfaction, and an emphasis on isolation for artistic growth.

However, women's ideas of their isolation in association with their art vary greatly from the male poets' views. As Anne K. Mellor argues, "[i]n their writings,...[a woman's literary] self typically locates its identity in its connections with a larger human group, whether the family or a social community."⁸³ Women poets consistently discuss their desire to be accepted as efficacious members of the literary community, not to establish themselves as isolated individuals struggling with their art. Indeed, women took advantage of their growing acceptance in the public world to express their awareness of the struggles of women within it. Harriet Guest argues that Elizabeth Carter often struggled with the decision to publish and commonly expressed her concern about exposing her more private life in a public setting. Guest explains that Carter believed "[p]ublication is achieved, or gone through with, at the expense of personal modesty, but it clearly is an activity in which she thinks women should be involved."⁸⁴ Although most women did rely to some extent on the income that their writings produced, it is clear that writing also provided women with the means to discuss their concerns about the culture. However risky it might seem, publication ultimately offered women an important opportunity to express their thoughts on being a woman and a writer. In communicating their views of the literary community, women poets revised a prominent assumption about the solitary nature of the Romantic poet.

The women poets chosen for this analysis wrote about the formation of intellectual community, their place in the literary culture, and the subjugation of

⁸³ Anne K. Mellor, "A Criticism of Their Own: Romantic Women Literary Critics," in *Questioning Romanticism*, ed. John Beer (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 31.

⁸⁴ Harriet Guest, *Small Change: Women, Learning, Patriotism, 1750-1810* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 116.

female authors in order to emphasise that the literary world could be a harsh place for women. The poets selected for this examination represent a wide range of women: from working-class to middle-class women; married, widowed, single women; public figures and more private individuals; prominent authors and some lesser-known writers. Some see poetry as a valuable tool for improving and structuring their lives; others feel the dominance of the society is too great a pressure to ignore and therefore express their disfavour publicly through their poetry. These women feel the presence, if not pressures, of the patriarchal society in their lives and within the literary culture. They each express their concerns about their place in the literary community not only as women, but also as poets.

Diversity and heterogeneity were indeed fundamental to the establishment of a viable literary community in which women could successfully participate. Therefore, the poems analysed in this chapter articulate the various struggles that these diverse women poets encountered as writers. They discussed the following concerns: recovering an intellectual salon for men and women from the negative stereotypes about public spaces in order to stress the importance of conversation (Hannah More), overcoming misogynist views (Ann Yearsley), receiving support from friends (Priscilla Pointon), locating influences and developing a sense of community (Helen Maria Williams), continuing to write when words are impermanent (Isabella Lickbarrow), finding inspiration in a gender-biased literary world (Joanna Baillie), reconciling the separation of the classes (Elizabeth Hands), avoiding public criticism (Mary Julia Young), escaping from stale and conventional notions of women writers (Maria and Harriet Falconar), and reducing the harshness of the literary culture (Eliza Thompson).

The poems above also confront the application of emotion, inspiration, the power of the written word, class barriers, the reactions of critics, and the harshness of the literary community. It is interesting to consider that when these women poets discuss negative emotions, these feelings result from their inability to assimilate easily with the literary culture or occur when the poets acknowledge various societal pressures. However, when these women poets discuss a shared intellectual community such as the Bluestockings, the importance of a female mentor, or the influence of other writers, their arguments are positively expressed in relation to gender and the literary community. One methodology is to present a negative aspect of the literary culture as a hardship, then offer a contrasting positive viewpoint in order to highlight the benefits of women's participation.

In addition, the poems discussed in this chapter openly assert women poets' struggles in the literary community and their desires to be participants in the literary culture alongside their male counterparts. These poems respond to the developing literary culture by calling for the successful inclusion of diverse, intellectual women: More wants conversation between male and female intellectuals to be recognised as a valuable exchange of knowledge; Yearsley wants an end to harsh, misogynist opinions; Pointon wants support from her friends; Williams and Thompson want positive emotions to be imparted to all members of the literary community; Lickbarrow wants the written word to endure and others to be inspired to write; Baillie wants to see the positive inspiration and encouragement of women writers; Hands wants an end to class barriers; Young wants to publish without fear of harsh criticism; and the Falconars want to see greater acceptance of literary women and a reduction in the stereotypical views of the sex. It is clear that the female poets

examined above responded to the developing literary community by asserting their views on the position of women in the literary culture.

Consequently, women poets expressed their concerns about the importance of participating in the literary culture through personalised representations of the issues which most concerned them. They attempted to characterise a diverse literary community which allows for personal expression and maintains individuality. Yet it is evident that personal beliefs, class divisions, and gender distinctions still complicated their attempts to formulate a coherent aesthetic community. However, their efforts to define and form a successful literary community by negotiating social differences were only the starting points to assimilating with the literary culture.

Indeed, these women writers “were intensely alive,” as Newlyn phrases it, “to the ways in which they might turn their own subordinate status to creative use; and they frequently collapsed the division between writing- and reading-subjects as a mode of self-empowerment.”⁸⁵ Certainly, the writings presented here prove the existence of a common thread of feminine polemic and a mutual belief in the influence and importance of women in the literary culture. Their works convincingly show that women poets wanted a voice, used that voice, and hoped for things to improve.

⁸⁵ Newlyn, 232.

4

A CASE STUDY: WOMEN'S ABOLITIONIST VERSE

The eighteenth-century movement to end slavery in Britain is an important indication of women poets' increasing engagement with their developing society. As indicated previously, the significant historical events troubling Britain coincided with an increasing acceptance of women and what were considered "feminine" traits. As the gendered organisation of society was beginning to shift, women found that they had access to the male-dominated public world with pronounced approval. A feminisation of the culture and the further acknowledgement of women's influence in the public sphere—especially witnessed in the growing prominence of female poets in the literary community—occurred during the turbulent age of British Romanticism. In writing abolitionist verse, women writers could uphold their appropriate social posture while publicly protesting Britain's iniquities. In response to the abolition movement, women poets condemned the evils of slavery and petitioned for changes at home to encourage an improved, more successful Britain.

Previous chapters have explored Romanticism as it relates to women poets, determined their use of sensibility and feeling within their poems as a means to link the private and the public spheres, and explored the formations of community and

their responses to belonging to the literary culture. The motifs apparent in these discussions such as the amalgamation of masculine and feminine, the linking of reason with feeling, the application of economic imagery, and the feminisation of the culture, are located within the abolitionist poems analysed within this chapter, as well.

This final chapter locates these concerns within the abolition debate as a means to focus the discussion on a particular cultural issue in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century British society. In fact, abolitionism can be considered a microcosm of these concerns which were articulated by women poets and central to the cultural transformations of this period in British history. Women's poetic calls to end slavery applied similar arguments to those found in previous poems. In the "Address to Sensibility" genre, the powerful effect of emotions, the desire to connect with others, the importance of reason, and the use of feeling as a means to link the public with the private sphere were prevalent themes. Similarly, in verse against slavery, women poets relied on the potency of emotion to influence public opinion. They contended that enslaved Africans had feelings, were human, and deserved compassionate relief from the evils of slavery. In addition, women poets constructed communities of Africans, Britons, and slave-traders, to name a few, in order to advance their claims that freedom should be extended to all. Just as the formation of intellectual community was vital in supporting women's integration within the literary culture, community served its purpose in abolitionist verse by joining disparate groups in order to argue for a superior world which champions diversity. Indeed, the accounts of sensibility and emotion and the models of different forms of community which were discussed in previous chapters are used again within abolitionist poetry.

Women's abolitionist poems also denote a commitment to diversity. For example, as I will discuss, Eliza Knipe described both the physicality and the

emotional qualities of an African community through stark portraits of the female members of a tribe in her petition for abolition. However, Hannah More avoided this type of intimate examination of human suffering and focused on the British communities of traders and members of Parliament in order to argue in support of a bill to end the slave trade. She then infused her pleas with emotional and religious declarations. In order to support an abolitionist future, Harriet Falconar reverted to the brighter days of England's past through references to influential literary figures and even royalty. In a poem unlike the rest, Anna Barbauld represented the evil side of slavery by describing its pernicious nature as a disease, a rape, and a loss of femininity. Thirty-five years later, Amelia Opie focused on the workings of the sugar trade, through the voice of an enslaved man, to emphasise to children the global impacts of slavery. These few examples exemplify the varied approaches of women poets as they responded to the political and social changes in Britain during the years leading up to the end of slavery in 1833. Additionally, the works of Ann Yearsley, Maria Falconar, Helen Maria Williams, and Mary Robinson are analysed below, providing further evidence of the diverse responses to the abolition debate and the resolve of women poets to critique the changing culture.

Indeed, these poetical works did not merely endorse abolition. The distinctly polemical tones inherent within the poems often indirectly challenged the gender differences within British society. In these changing times, Britain's old civil model was becoming progressively obsolete. Britain could not maintain a divided society comprised of detached public and private spheres while building a modernised culture without slavery. A close examination of a selection of the poetry written during this period against slavery and the trade reveals that this sector of philanthropy enabled women poets to contest the treatment of unknown Africans and, in addition, promote

progress for the benefit of their sisters at home. Some female poets not only acted as purveyors of freedom, but also identified with Africans as victims. In response to the changing society, their literary aims were two-fold: while they wished for slaves' lives to improve, they also expressed wider, politicised arguments for a better Britain.

Therefore, the first section of this chapter supplies a brief synopsis of the historical factors which sparked the rise in abolitionist concerns. Caught up in the growing slavery debate were issues of modernisation, humanitarianism, and feelings of social responsibility. In order to achieve the aim of ending slavery, all facets of the society—urban, rural, rich, poor, men, women—had to be included in the campaign. Women's emotional involvement in issues related to the slave trade, such as sugar consumption, proved to be strong influences on public opinion. Especially concerning literary petitions, women poets played an important role in spreading abolitionist sentiment. Their poems against slavery and the slave trade were significant public responses to the complex issues of freedom, human suffering, commerce, and social community that were heightened by the abolitionist movement.

FOSTERING ABOLITIONIST SENTIMENT

Historical Background

In the Romantic era, the debate about freedom permeated all spheres of British society. For some Britons, the revolutionary wars against the French helped intensify the sense of man's fundamental right to freedom. Yet, while Britain was struggling for its own freedom from the French, Britons were simultaneously enslaving Africans for economic gain. Although there were approximately 20,000 blacks, most likely products of the slave trade, living in Britain by 1750, there were thousands more

working in British colonies in the West Indies.¹ Despite the abrogation of the slave trade in 1807, industries dependent upon slave labour continued to flourish. By 1833, when the Emancipation Act was passed, it was understood that roughly 800,000 blacks were liberated by the British.² These astonishing numbers indicate the vitality of slavery over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Simply, by the turn of the century, slavery could not be tolerated in a freedom-loving nation. As David Turley points out, the “radical assertion of a fundamental equality of rights for all legitimated the linking of abolition with the drive for political change at home.”³ Since slavery was indicative of the old system, abolition would be emblematic of the future of England. Abolition, as J.R. Oldfield argues, was analogous with “progress, change, sensitivity, and compassion, with what we might call ‘modernity’. (The slave trade, by implication, was associated with everything that was old, corrupt, and decaying.)”⁴

During this time, an intensification in the culture’s acknowledgement of sensibility and a rise in humanitarianism concurred with the permutations in gender expectations and the campaign against slavery. In his informative, if complex, essay “Capitalism, Class, and Antislavery,” John Ashworth attempts to map out economic changes and explain two different models of the simultaneous rise in abolitionist sentiment.⁵ He compares his interpretation to that of fellow historian Thomas L. Haskell. In both diagrams, shifts in the economy such as increased market activity and more productive labour practices influenced changes in the values of society.

¹ See J.R. Oldfield, *Popular Politics and British Anti-Slavery: The Mobilisation of Public Opinion against the Slave Trade, 1787–1807* (London: Frank Cass, 1998), 20.

² See Edith F. Hurwitz, *Politics and the Public Conscience* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1973), 19.

³ David Turley, *The Culture of English Antislavery, 1780–1860* (London: Routledge, 1991), 165.

⁴ Oldfield, 118.

⁵ See John Ashworth, “Capitalism, Class, and Antislavery,” in *The Antislavery Debate: Capitalism and Abolitionism as a Problem in Historical Interpretation*, ed. Thomas Bender (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 263–89.

According to Ashworth, these transformations included a growth of conscience and the recognition of the importance of the family, the acceptance of free labour as morally superior, and the belief in collective morality. For Haskell, society gleaned a new awareness of responsibility and the potential for improvement. At any rate, both see these developments in the values of British society as precursors to the rise in humanitarianism and even the resistance to slavery. In other words, even the conventionally male-dominated realms of commerce were infiltrated by more emotional factors such as morality and character.

In his own essay, Haskell states he and colleague David Brion Davis have located “the emergence of a new humanitarian sensibility in the eighteenth century” as it relates to this shift in the capitalist structure of society accelerated by the changing attitudes of citizens.⁶ Although Haskell’s historicist approach delves into a quite sociological explanation of the movement against slavery, it is his explanation of the growing morality of society and its implications that are emphasised here. His definition of humanitarianism is rooted in class, but provides an understanding of the alterations in social consciousness. Haskell believes that reformers may be defined by their “moral insight, their courage in the face of adversity, and their tenacity in uprooting entrenched institutions. They were consummate interpreters of a new moral universe.”⁷

Collective Action: The Need for Women’s Participation

What is notable in the attempts of Ashworth, Haskell, and Davis to define ideological shifts in relation to economic change during the period is their emphasis

⁶ Thomas L. Haskell, “Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility, Part I” in *The Antislavery Debate: Capitalism and Abolitionism as a Problem in Historical Interpretation*, ed. Thomas Bender (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 134.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 135.

on the humanitarian, moral, and collective action of citizens. It is also further evidence that the structural changes in British society also resulted in a rise in humanitarian convictions and abolitionist sentiment. If England were to fashion a new, modern society and adopt abolition as a chief social responsibility, then widespread support in the cause was essential. Turley argues that an end to slavery was in the national interest:

Slaves were to obtain freedom, missionaries black souls, British consumers cheaper sugar, manufacturers and traders new markets in other sugar producing areas benefiting from the ending of the West Indian monopoly and, did they but realise it, slave-owners themselves were to benefit not only in terms of possible compensation but through being forced to become more efficient and to modernise their operations.⁸

Remarkably, the debate over abolition seemed to unite various sectors of society irrespective of personal beliefs or social distinctions.⁹ For example, religious differences did not subsume the arguments at hand. As Turley further argues, “[t]he separate religious tendencies in antislavery...exhibited either particular reform interests within the larger reform complex or approached collaborative activity from somewhat different perspectives.”¹⁰ Class did not seem to be a major divide of the society either, although, in the earlier stages of the movement, men and women of the rural middle class participated the most in organising groups, supporting petitions, and issuing abolitionist literatures.¹¹ Even gender differences did not seem to restrict the abolitionist movement. On the contrary, women’s involvement in the campaign was essential for its success.

⁸ Turley, 38.

⁹ See Peter J. Kitson, “The Abolition Debate,” in *Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation: Writings in the British Romantic Period*, ed. Kitson (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1999), xxv.

¹⁰ Turley, 116.

¹¹ See Oldfield, 7.

Precisely, if abolition was to be realised eventually, then society's support in the movement had to incorporate women. In her work *Consuming Anxieties*, Charlotte Sussman remarks that abolition "worked to renegotiate British cultural identities and gender roles. Women were accorded an innovative and influential form of political agency by the antislavery movement, which often worked in harmony with a particular formulation of domestic ideology."¹² Here, Sussman hints at the complexity of a movement which relied on women's successful negotiation of their private and public roles. Caught between public action against the trade and private responses to the repugnant practices of slavery, women played an essential role in abolition. One issue which exemplifies the correlation between the feminisation of the culture and women's influence is the abstention from sugar within the home.

Slave-produced, West-Indian sugar was directly related to the slave trade and slavery itself. By purchasing slave-grown produce, British consumers were financing a business, based on the oppression of humans, that spanned oceans. Turley asserts that abstention resonated "a sense of Britain's central role in a world-wide economy and permitted individuals to believe they could contribute to a good cause without relying upon government or becoming enmeshed in politics."¹³ Yet refusing to use slave-grown goods is in itself a politicised action whether or not citizens felt as if they were directly engaging in governmental affairs. Although women who refused to buy sugar or use West-Indian products in their home did so under the protective veil of domesticity, their private choice marked the public feminisation of consumerism in British society and the beginning of a new, politicised voice for women. Sussman argues that "[t]he connection drawn by the abolitionist movement between the

¹² Charlotte Sussman, *Consuming Anxieties* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 129.

¹³ Turley, 78.

purchasing of colonial goods and the international political system gave women a new and crucial place in the political arena, not only as compassionate observers, but also as wielders of a material, though circumscribed power.”¹⁴

In this case, then, women demonstrated the capacity to sway their male contemporaries’ tenets by influencing them through an acceptable route. As Sussman further asserts, “[i]f a woman...refuses to consume sugar, then she can act as a ‘pattern,’ an ‘example,’ to the men who observe her. There seems to be a connection between her ability to alter her own feelings in terms of the feelings of racial others, that is, to sympathize, and her capacity to ‘model’ those feelings for the English men who will be persuaded to imitate her.”¹⁵ A domestic woman moved by her humanity and compassion acted as an exemplar of proper behaviour. If her feelings could guide others’ opinions on the purchasing of goods produced through slave labour, then women could also inform the wider, more public debates about the slave trade and slavery.

In order to educate the society on the evils of slavery, feeling was widely embraced as a political tool. As more information circulated to a wider audience, opposition to slavery rose markedly. With the amount of information reaching citizens escalating, more people were changing their minds about slavery and its repugnant practices. Historian James Walvin argues that “in the years 1787–1833 [when] slavery came under attack, much of the growing revulsion felt in Britain derived from the evidence about the nature of black slavery and the slave trade brought before the British public. Thus, the British debate about slavery was informed by an awareness of black slavery which contrasted with the earlier

¹⁴ Sussman, 127.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 126.

ignorance and indifference.”¹⁶ Previous apathy was subsumed by compassion, sentiment, and empathy.

Societies, petitions, public meetings, and even emblems were used as political schemes to amass support for the movement that would ultimately win freedom for slaves in 1833. Moreover, many of these methods marked the crossing of emotions into the political arena and supported women’s participation in the campaign. As Sussman again argues, a woman’s “strong feelings and quick sensibilities, especially qualify her, not only to sympathise with suffering, but also to plead for the oppressed, and there is no calculating the extent and importance of the moral reformations that might be effected through the combined exertion of her gentle influence and steady resolution.”¹⁷ By adopting sympathy as a means to moral reform, abolitionists indicated that women were vital components of their crusade.

Yet Walvin, who presents an androcentric view of the eighteenth century in most of his published works on the slave trade, claims that abolition as a social movement was not constructed to disturb the established social organisation.¹⁸ In his book *Questioning Slavery*, Walvin concedes that the presence of women was fairly prominent during the movement, even though he claims that they were required by conventional gender divisions to remain in the private sphere.¹⁹ Edith F. Hurwitz shares Walvin’s view that abolition did not attempt to restructure society. She argues that “[a]bolitionists did not wish to do away with the existing social order. They had a profound respect for the institutions of British society. As they saw it, the achievement of the goal of reform—abolition—was a fundamental method of

¹⁶ James Walvin, *England, Slaves, and Freedom, 1776–1838* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1986), 24.

¹⁷ Sussman, 123–24.

¹⁸ See especially James Walvin, *Questioning Slavery* (London: Routledge, 1996), 162.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 162.

conserving those institutions inasmuch as they were guardians of the moral order.”²⁰

However, Seymour Drescher grants that “[h]istorians now routinely conceive of British abolition as part of a long-term structural process, involving variables of demography, economics, political economy, ideology, class relationships, popular organization and slave resistance.”²¹ Yet unmistakably absent from Drescher’s account of societal change during this period of campaigning is the importance of gender.

These historians’ arguments are disabled by their assumptions of gender conformity and societal structure when in fact, during this time, Britain underwent a cultural feminisation and encouraged women’s wider participation in public and societal developments. Throughout this dissertation I have argued that Romantic-period women poets fervently responded to society’s changing notions of gender—such as the increased acceptance of feelings and sensibility, and the evolution of ideas about the literary community—by writing powerful poems which expressed their reactions, opinions, and feelings. Their poems testify to the significance of women with regard to the momentous changes in the societal structure of late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century Britain.

And, abolition was no different; it was a social movement which distinctly relied on women and a political cause that enabled women to claim a public voice through acceptable literary means. By engaging in this political issue, gender roles and the efficacy of feelings assumed new meaning. The abolitionist movement, therefore, is a site of cultural change which illuminates women’s history. It dismantles Habermasian models of the public and private spheres, encourages more

²⁰ Hurwitz, 18.

²¹ Seymour Drescher, “Whose Abolition? Popular Pressure and the Ending of the British Slave Trade,” *Past and Present* 143 (1994): 137.

radical readings along Wollstonecraftian lines of the role of women in society, and verifies claims of the impact of emotions on developments in the age—all points explored in previous chapters in order to enlighten the understanding of women poets' role in Romanticism.

The Literary Campaign

Literature was a crucial source whereby men and women gleaned vital abolitionist concerns. The written word prevailed as an indispensable purveyor of information to Britons during the abolitionist movement. Like the lecture, which served as a powerful means to spread abolitionist concerns to large groups, the written word was becoming an effective way of spreading anti-slavery sentiment.²² One particularly notable example of this literary strategy is evident in the formation of the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade and their efforts to disseminate information to the reading public. "Whatever knowledge about slavery existed before 1787 the formation of the Abolition Society in that year ensured a massive upsurge in anti-slavery propaganda with an attendant interest in slavery itself."²³ Some antislavery societies, like the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade which commissioned Hannah More's verse, directly depended on women to produce affective works that would influence the general society. They openly believed that women writers' productions of powerful sentimental literature which conveyed emotional distress would generate support in the movement and lead to great political change.²⁴ In the antislavery movement, therefore, the exigent linking of emotions

²² See James Walvin, "The Propaganda of Anti-Slavery," in *Slavery and British Society, 1776–1846*, ed. Walvin (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1982), 57.

²³ James Walvin, introduction to *Slavery and British Society*, ed. Walvin (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1982), 8.

²⁴ See Sussman, 20.

with literature in terms of political change is unmistakable. "In the course of the eighteenth century the 'great question then was whether the literary imagination could build a bridge of sympathy and understanding across the enormous gulf that divided primitive and civilized cultures.'"²⁵ Like the bridging of the public and private through the use of sensibility and, more specifically, the synthesis of thought, emotion, and community as seen in the "Address to Sensibility," within abolitionist poetry, emotional pleas to relieve the sufferings of slaves encouraged the creation of a socially diverse community built on sympathetic concern.

Moreover, this linking of sympathy with literature is of significant importance to the discussion of women poets' force in the movement to ameliorate society's shortcomings. Women who entered the campaign via the literary avenues accessible to them gained greater recognition in public society than if they had tried to intervene via more straightforward political methods because they were able to assert their own political agendas. As Clare Midgley states, "[i]t was in the field of imaginative literature that women made one of their most significant contributions to the early abolition campaign."²⁶ In addition, as Sussman argues, "[r]arely has a political movement been so conscious of the cultural power of literary methods and texts as the antislavery movement was....[I]t consistently relied on rhetorical strategies borrowed from literary discourse, both sentimental and satirical, but also...counted on the motivational power of the stories and poems they distributed to awaken abolitionist energy."²⁷

Moira Ferguson, in her invaluable work *Subject to Others: British Women Writers and Colonial Slavery, 1670–1834*, examines this abolitionist motif through

²⁵ Hurwitz, 26.

²⁶ Clare Midgley, *Women Against Slavery: The British Campaigns, 1780–1870* (London: Routledge, 1992), 29.

²⁷ Sussman, 3.

almost two hundred years of literature. She claims that “the historical intersection of a feminist impulse with anti-slavery agitation helped secure white British women’s political self-empowerment.”²⁸ I likewise embrace this view. She also believes that women in the seventeenth century and beyond “capitalized on the cult of sentiment to garner influence and affect the cultural mainstream. Sentimental literature enabled women to tap an unexpected outlet that doubled as a political platform.”²⁹ This idea is offered here, as well, although I examine the specific genre of abolitionist poetry rather than the larger scope of sentimental literatures. Ferguson gives numerous literary examples—drama, fiction, letters, poetry—and some of these same poetical works are analysed here because of their importance in establishing women’s abolitionist verse as a case study of the topics of sensibility and community and the overarching theme of diversity.

Ferguson’s work has much to offer to the discussion of women’s abolitionist literature. Her broad study, which examines literatures from the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, necessarily generalises the literature of these periods in order to substantiate her arguments for the significance of these works to the on-going campaign. Ferguson provides large extracts from the abolitionist literatures she has chosen in order to elucidate her points. One of her goals is to show that “[w]omen [writers] mediated their own needs and desires, their unconscious sense of social invalidation, through representations of the colonial other, who in the process became more severely objectified and marginalized.”³⁰ One of Ferguson’s implicit concerns is to chronicle the representations of black women in white women’s abolitionist writings.

²⁸ Moira Ferguson, *Subject to Others: British Women Writers and Colonial Slavery, 1670–1834* (London: Routledge, 1992), 5.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 75.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

Although Ferguson does focus on British women writers, she relies on description rather than close literary analysis to prove her sometimes expansive points. She often disregards specific instances within the poetic lines themselves which could enhance her claims about a work's importance or influence. Rather, in keeping with her propensity to homogenise the literature of the period, she selects a large extract from a work and then proceeds to describe its significance. Moreover, in her introduction, Ferguson constructs several groupings of writings from the mid-1780s, after 1788, the early to mid-1790s, after 1793, and between 1807 and the 1820s. She claims that each of these periods shows a pattern in women's abolitionist literature. For example, she asserts that after 1788, "protests conformed to a rather sensationalised, Manichaean formula that typecast slaves and slaveowners alike."³¹ She states that after 1793, "radically-inclined women writers reverted to a camouflaged language of sentiment, suicide, and patriotism."³²

Although my chapter covers some common ground with Ferguson's study, it differs by offering a more refined approach to investigating eighteenth-century abolitionist poems. In contrast to Ferguson, I closely examine the poetry between the years 1787 and 1826 in order to represent the variety of women's abolitionist verse, yet focus this expansive genre around the most significant moments in abolitionist history. The forty years I deal with proved to be a dynamic time for abolitionist verse. I argue that women poets exhibited cohesive aims and similar literary themes, but presented their views in diverse ways which did not follow a certain formula as Ferguson suggests.

I provide detailed analyses of several abolitionist poems in order to trace the uses of sensibility, the various representations of community, and the emphases on

³¹ Ibid., 3.

³² Ibid., 4.

diversity that were crucial in the Romantic period and prominent within women's verse. All of the poems that I discuss below emphasise the importance of sympathy and the prevalence and persistence of feelings. Emotion is a common and expected political tool within these Romantic-period poems condoning abolition. All poems speak of the establishment of community through various groupings including: women, slaves, Africans, Britons, politicians, traders, and writers and their Muses. These prevalent themes are interrelated with a study of particular leitmotifs that are not highlighted within Ferguson's examination. These crucial motifs include: commerce and the use of economic language in conjunction with feelings, the representation of social communities, the descriptions of women, and the use of literature as evidence of progression within the culture of the abolitionist era.

Eliza Knipe's 1787 poem "Atomboka and Omaza; An African Story" begins the investigation. Five poems from 1788, written in support of the bill on the abolition of the slave trade, are analysed next. These include Hannah More's "Slavery: A Poem," Ann Yearsley's "A Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave Trade," Harriet and Maria Falconar's "Slavery A Poem," and Helen Maria Williams's "A Poem on the Bill Lately Passed for Regulating the Slave-Trade." All five women present various perspectives—More as a commissioned Evangelical, Yearsley as her impoverished protégée, the Falconar sisters as teenagers, and Williams as a more radical Dissenter—in conjunction with this Parliamentary action. After the 1788 surge in abolitionist verse, women continued to publish poems against slavery and the slave trade. Anna Barbauld's "Epistle to William Wilberforce, Esq., on the Rejection of the Bill for abolishing the Slave Trade"(1791), Mary Robinson's "The Negro Girl"(1800), and Amelia Opie's "The Black Man's Lament; or, How to Make Sugar"(1826) complete the exploration of abolitionist poems. These works

demonstrate the various leitmotifs specified above and exemplify the key themes which have been detailed throughout the dissertation. They convincingly show that women's abolitionist verse expressed arguments to end slavery and improve Britain in diverse ways.

EXAMINING ABOLITIONIST POEMS

Eliza Knipe: Bodily Strength Allows African Women to Communicate and Feel

One work that is not analysed but only mentioned briefly within Ferguson's study is the striking poem "Atomboka and Omaza; An African Story" (1787) by Eliza Knipe.³³ Knipe (c.1764–1824) was frequently involved in charity work and would marry a wealthy brewer, John Cobbold, after the death of her first husband, William Clarke.³⁴ Knipe's poem is primarily a love story of two Africans, one of whom is a particularly strong female character who defies the conventional representations of women in most abolitionist verse. The remarkable descriptions of this African female warrior present an interesting and alternative view to other poems written around this time. Yet Knipe's poem exemplifies the same motifs of emotion and community present in other Romantic-period abolitionist verse. Although Knipe exposes an unknown world which holds physicality at its centre, this society seems less foreign as she familiarises the reader with the emotional responses of the injured and captive Africans.

The reader is witness to a bloody battle in Africa. Atomboka, the warrior chief, calls for his people to fight the opposing side: "LIFT HIGH THE AXE; *your enemies*

³³ Eliza Knipe, "Atomboka and Omaza; An African Story," in *Six Narrative Poems* (London: C. Dilly, 1787), 51–60.

³⁴ "Cobbold, Elizabeth," in *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English: Women Writers from the Middle Ages to the Present*, ed. Virginia Blain et al., (London: B.T. Batsford Ltd., 1990), 219–20. Eliza Knipe was also known as Elizabeth Cobbold.

shall fall, / And please their spirits with a feast of blood!"(48–49). This repeated cry emphasises the pride these strong Africans take in overpowering their enemies.

Again, the physicality of the tribe is highlighted in the following intense description:

"Their breasts were scarr'd with honour-marking wounds; / Their cold hands firmly grasp'd the bloody spear; / Their eyes glar'd fiercely still, though fix'd in death"(50–52).

Unexpectedly perhaps, it is the female warrior who is most strikingly portrayed throughout Knipe's poem. The first female whom readers see in action, Fatima, runs

To aid her dying lover:—Round his neck
Her glossy arms she threw, and fondly rais'd
His drooping head. ALGANOR heav'd a sigh,
And sunk in death.—Despair and vengeance fir'd
Her panting heart.

(82–86)

Even though Fatima is surrounded by conflict and is herself fighting against those who have killed Alganor, her initial response is to comfort her dying lover on the battlefield. However, "Despair and vengeance" take hold once she can no longer provide emotional solace; her thoughts turn to revenge and anger.

Although Fatima attempts to avenge Alganor's death, she is unable to attack since she has been poisoned with a dart during the battle. Interestingly, Fatima thus attempts to wound her enemy by speaking out against him; yet she is denied a voice: "Th' unfinish'd sentence quiver'd on her lips"(96). This negation of a female's voice signals that this compassionate woman does not possess the ability to communicate effectively when her physical strength is weakened. Fatima is not, however, portrayed as a weak woman. She dies gallantly on the field by her fallen lover's side in a moment which reinforces tribal kinship and emotional solidarity.

Although Fatima succumbs to her fatal injuries, it is the physical strength of women that is emphasised in this African society. The chief's lover and the female figurehead of the tribe, Omaza, also has a strong and physical presence:

Around her jetty neck a well-strung row
Of teeth, the trophies of victorious fight,
Torn from the jaw of many a conquer'd foe,
Display'd her pow'r. Firm was her dauntless look,
And proud she stalk'd by ATOMBOKA's side.

(33–37)

Here, her necklace represents authority and physical strength, rather than expected fashion and delicateness. Omaza and Atomboka fight together as equals on the field of battle as a “warlike pair”(102). During the fight they are both injured, but show no outward pain. They fall together on the blood-stained field and must surrender to their enemy.

A slave ship eventually arrives on shore where the captives are being held and Atomboka and Omaza become passengers bound to serve as slaves in a distant clime. Stereotypically, perhaps, while Atomboka remains firm, Omaza displays emotion: “...with heart-rendering groans, / Indulg'd the keener transports of despair”(128–29). However, the words “indulged” and “keener” signify that a display of emotion is a sign of heightened sensibility or an awareness of one's impassioned self. Omaza is affected by her emotions and, therefore, outwardly expresses them. This display of feeling is portrayed as a positive quality, and Omaza is a richer African figure for it. In this African society, bodily strength is tantamount to possessing the ability to communicate and feel. In fact, further into the perilous and tormenting voyage, even chief Atomboka is overcome with emotion. He shares his feelings with Omaza in a moment of mutual agony: “Then low, in fearful whispers, thus explain'd / The mournful thoughts that rose in either breast”(144–45). Their similar physical pain and

shared emotional fears further strengthen their bond. Omaza and Atomboka ultimately choose joint suicide over suffering as slaves in a foreign land.

Throughout this poem, Knipe presents a remarkable conception of the African female. Omaza is not only beautiful and emotional, but she also possesses great physical strength. Knipe skilfully joins these two characteristics in her portrait of African women. When Fatima loses her bodily power from a fatal injury, she is unable to speak. However, the stalwart Omaza is able to express emotions effectively and communicate her distress to her lover because she is still physically enabled. Although physical strength may not offer a practical way for British women to advance within their own society, through the correlation of bodily strength and emotion, Knipe presents a female character full of varied and effective social powers. These African females are strong, emotional, and powerful figures in their community. Even the male figures within the poem succumb to physical harm and emotional outpouring. Within Knipe's verse we witness a similar criss-crossing of gender distinctions that were apparent in the "Address to Sensibility" genre.

This intermingling of gender attributes is further indicated within the various formations of community in the poem. The women are one grouping of Africans. They possess physical strength, show emotional attachment for their fellow tribesmen, and communicate to others through the summoning of emotions. Fatima, for example, resists the enemy yet still runs to comfort her lover when he is dying. The men are another group of strong warriors who are apt to show emotions when they are allied with women. Atomboka, after seeing his wife Omaza emotionally grieve, feels compelled to share his feelings with her. Consequently, when the Africans are captured, they represent an alternate community, that of slaves. When Omaza and

Atomboka dive into the ocean “clasp’d in a fond embrace”(173), male and female are forever bonded emotionally and physically.

Knipe’s abolitionist message is commingled with a further polemical aim. The need to end the slave trade is clear; Knipe’s social message for Britain is perhaps more indistinct. While the sense that the Africans’ seemingly violent and primal lives provide their community with some cohesion is maintained throughout, the suicide of the two strongest members of the tribe suggests that emotions provide a stronger link between these men and women. Britons may not identify with the actions of these savage people, but a more emotional understanding with one another is a quality that the people of England can also possess. Although it can be claimed that the expression of their emotions ultimately leads them to choose suicide, the fact remains that death enables Omaza and Atomboka to retain free will and preserve a deep connection to each other. Knipe has successfully emotionalised and humanised the slave. In fact, Knipe removes much of their savageness by imparting emotion and community to their tribe. Therefore, Knipe’s wish for men and women to create a close community seems not only possible, but also desirable in an abolitionist world.

Hannah More: Wide Political Appeal for British Abolitionist Sentiment

In the following year under commission by the Abolition Society, Hannah More penned “Slavery: A Poem”(1788).³⁵ It was hoped by the Society that as a politically conservative, uncontroversially religious, and popular writer, More could connect with Britons in great numbers through her verse. Strategically, the publication of her poem was timed so that it coincided with the bill on the abolition of the slave trade which was presented to Parliament that same year. In reference to her

³⁵ Hannah More, “Slavery: A Poem” (London: T. Cadell, 1788).

poem, More exclaimed, “if it does not come out at this particular moment, when the discussion comes on in Parliament, it will not be worth a straw...Time is everything.”³⁶ Even More herself believed that emotionally-charged literature could direct public opinion and determine political outcome. While the commissioning of the poem may have influenced her approach to writing about slavery, she fervently believed in the abolition cause; this political passion energised her work.

Like the poems by Helen Maria Williams and Isabella Lickbarrow about the inspiration of writers discussed in the previous chapter, More claims within her poem to have been inspired by Thomas Southerne’s adaptation of Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko*, the seventeenth-century work which chronicles the enslavement of an African royal: “O, plaintive Southerne! whose impassion’d strain / So oft has wak’d my languid Muse in vain!”(37–38). She states that her muse “burns to emulate thy glowing page;.../ Deceiv’d, for genius we mistake delight, / Charm’d as we read, we fancy we can write”(40, 47–48). More’s admissions that was she inspired by Southerne’s tale of woe and that she has perhaps been fooled by passion into writing do little to encourage a more progressive reading of her work. Nevertheless, her foray into abolitionist writing signified a demonstrative female presence in a male-dominated political world. In case her readers resist her views and the representations of African people and British citizens, More reassuringly writes, “Fair Truth, a hallow’d guide! inspires my song”(50).

The poem maintains a distinct focus on England’s reputation; More ultimately appeals for governmental change to alleviate the ills of trade and commerce. She attacks the slave traders and petitions not only the heavens for aid, but also the public for sympathetic understanding. Although More injects sympathy and feeling into her

³⁶ M.G. Jones, *Hannah More* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952), 84.

pragmatic arguments, her case for the plight of slaves is somewhat weakened by sustaining a certain distance from the slaves as individuals and fellow humans. More, writing in couplets, places slaves in opposition to the people of Britain. Not only are slaves denied freedom, but in More's eyes they also lack individual identities, they look different, believe in different causes, and perhaps do not even think as rationally as Britons. The similarities she does find between the English and the Africans seem to be in the common thread of sympathy and the ability to feel physical pain. Her compassion stems from the atrocities she finds within her own country: namely, the seemingly un-Christian behaviour of the traders, the harsh realities of commerce and trade, and the lack of public action to remedy the suffering of humans.

More begins with an invocation to the heavens for "LIBERTY! to shine on all"(2). She questions why Britain is sanctified by the light of freedom and asks, "Why lies sad Afric quench'd in total night?"(18). More expresses the issue of freedom as a division of light and dark, blessed or cursed, Britain versus Africa. Indeed, More utilises this series of dichotomies throughout her poem in order to place Africa in an antithetic posture to that of her cherished Britain. While she must attack the wrongs of slavery, More's chief concern lies in protecting the reputation of England as a country of freedom and goodwill, much like her poem on sensibility which portrayed Britain as a patriotic, freedom-loving nation.

In clear contrast to Knipe's approach which individualises Africans, More chooses to describe Africans as a group of weaker souls shrouded in darkness who deserve British sympathy, yet blemish England's pride:

No individual griefs my bosom melt,
For millions feel what Oroonoko felt:
Fir'd by no single wrongs, the countless host
I mourn, by rapine dragg'd from Afric's coast.

(55-58)

Unlike Knipe, More does not consider slaves as individual people, but prefers to address them as “the sable race”(60). Even when she uncharacteristically mentions “a slave”(161), it seems as if the term is meant in the collective because Africa’s torment is widespread. Because the perspective of the poem is broad throughout, the emphasis is on all of Britain’s wrongs or all of Africa’s suffering. Although she does mention the pains of Oroonoko and the slave Quashi, these instances serve to establish More’s work within a greater body of abolitionist literatures as these stories have been recounted by Southerne and James Ramsay, respectively.³⁷ If these works were popular among the eighteenth-century reading public, then More is aware of her own potential market.

However, it is imperative that More moves her readers emotionally in order to gain support for the bill and abolition itself. More recounts the physical anguish of Africans through the poignant recital of the scenes of a terrorised village:

Whene’er to Afric’s shores I turn my eyes,
 Horrors of deepest, deadliest guilt arise;
 I see, by more than Fancy’s mirror shewn,
 The burning village, and the blazing town:
 See the dire victim torn from social life,
 The shrieking babe, the agonizing wife!
 She, wretch forlorn! is dragg’d by hostile hands,
 To distant tyrants sold, in distant lands!

(95–102)

This description of the anguished villagers is the closest individual examination of suffering that More allows. What is important about this passage, however, is More’s use of female suffering to extend her calls for compassion. As the social microscope becomes more focused, first Africa, the village, and then the women in distress come into view. It is the woman’s cry for help and the breaking apart of the family with

³⁷ More’s own footnote credits the story of Quashi to James Ramsay in his *Essay on the Treatment of African Slaves*.

which Britons can most empathise, rather than the physical pains of an enslaved man, as in Knipe's poem. Appealing to the domestic concerns of those at home helps More to establish stronger feelings of sympathy. More boldly states that she even feels "guilt" from the notion that families are wracked with emotional distress.

More attempts to extend this emotional connection with African slaves by endeavouring to make the "savage" appear more human:

they have heads to think, and hearts to feel,
And souls to act, with firm tho' erring zeal;
For they have keen affections, kind desires,
Love strong as death, and active patriot fires;

(67-70)

In fact, More could just as easily be describing her fellow Englishmen. In her *Strictures*, More advocated the association of rationality and controlled sensibility in the interests of the moral good of the English people. However, as the poem progresses, it seems as if More cannot apply the same reasoning to Africans. She states that although the slaves are actually "...dark and savage, ignorant and blind, / They claim the common privilege of kind"(137-38). As Donna Landry has argued, More "falls back on a notion of their cultural difference as savagery....And while she insists vehemently that blacks can feel as well as whites, she seems less sanguine about their capacity to reason."³⁸ More's argument affirms that she believes the African people are savage, yet deserve to be treated as humans because they are in "his sacred image"(136). More believes a slave's value as a human being lies not just in his worth as a product of God's will, but also because he possesses a potent emotional core. Indeed, emotions are "exquisitely fashion'd in a slave"(161), and although "few can reason, all mankind can feel"(150).

³⁸ Donna Landry, *The Muses of Resistance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 239.

More's passionate descriptions of female suffering and the emphases on the emotional qualities of the slaves have the desired effect. It is clear that Africans can feel emotionally and physically, and this quality should make one sympathise with their plight. Yet it is in an address to the "murderers" to stop the torture of Africans where More's argument for abolition is most poignantly expressed:

Hold, murderers, hold! Nor aggravate distress;
Respect the passions you yourselves possess;
Ev'n you, of ruffian heart and ruthless hand,
Love your own offspring, love your native land.
Ah! leave them holy Freedom's cheering smile,
The heav'n-taught fondness for the parent soil;
Revere affections mingled with our frame,
In every nature, every clime the same;

(111–18)

Even the "ruffian heart," More says, has mutual understandings of the love of family and country. She instructs the tyrants to let slaves have their freedom because every human holds the capacity to feel regardless of culture or nationality.

More's attack on the evils of slavery become increasingly biting as she criticises the behaviour of the slave-traders. She addresses a trader as a "WHITE SAVAGE"(211) who makes "millions wretched, and thyself abhorr'd"(222). Alan Richardson argues that in More's poem "the slave-trade is problematic, precisely because it threatens to undermine the distinction between 'White' and 'Savage' on which the British redemption of Africa...is founded."³⁹ The trader personifies the dangerousness of slavery's potent influence on English shores. Not only is his business presented as debasing and disgusting, but More states that it is simply "pillage with a nobler name"(226). Perhaps, as a staunch Evangelical, her most scathing remark comes when she chides, "They are *not* Christians who infest"(188) Africa's land.

³⁹ Alan Richardson, "Darkness visible? Race and representation in Bristol abolitionist poetry, 1770–1810," in *Romanticism and Colonialism: Writing and Empire, 1780–1830*, ed. Tim Fulford and Peter J. Kitson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 139.

More's tone becomes even more terse as she describes the system of the slave trade as "opprobrious commerce"(135). More chooses to link the economic factors of the trade with emotion, once again to ensure the growth of sympathy in her readers. If she can link emotion to commerce, then her wish for sympathy and an eventual redemption of England's reputation will be realised. She describes the slave trade as a system which "Sees MAN the traffic, SOULS the merchandize!"(145). It is the heart and soul of the slave that have value to those not trading in human lives. For the traders, it is the "sordid lust of gold their fate controls, / The basest appetite of basest souls"(127–28). Even the traders' feelings of grandeur derive from the mere number of captured slaves: "Your sum of glory boasts a like amount"(224).

Therefore, it is Britain's duty to rectify its own economic practices and help the slaves. England has the political power to "let the nations know / The liberty she loves she will bestow"(253–54). More calls for action in order to restore the pride of freedom to England:

What page of human annals can record
A deed so bright as human rights restor'd?
O may that godlike deed, that shining page,
Redeem *our* fame, and consecrate *our* age!

(259–62)

This declaration is the objective of More's commissioned poem; she proposes parliamentary action in the form of a document which will live on as part of Britain's history. She labels it a "godlike" event which will illuminate England's reputation. It is reminiscent of the opening lines that implore heaven to spread the light of freedom throughout the world. So far, More has protested the treatment of the slaves, described their suffering, and reprimanded the traders. If these pleas have not persuaded her audience, then the italics in line 262 help to stress that ending the slave trade—signing the bill—is vital to protecting England's distinction as a land of

freedom. At the end of the poem, More predicts abolition will prevail: "Oppression's fall'n, and Slavery is no more!"(290).

It has been suggested by Ferguson that More's verse is "a formula, a kind of abolitionist shorthand that can be copied, expanded, or abbreviated at will."⁴⁰ True, More does employ several themes that are common to abolitionist verse such as biting depictions of society, destruction of the family, sympathy, appeals for societal change, and discussions of the ills of trade and commerce. Whether More is the pioneer of women's abolitionist verse remains equivocal. Ferguson herself claims that for a century before More, women were writing poems on the horrors of slavery. Knipe's poem, which preceded More's, perhaps fits somewhere in between these approaches. On the one hand, Knipe presents intense images of violent Africans in conflict with their captors, which is unlike later works. At the same time, she calls for a recognition of Africans as emotional people, like the abolitionist poems which follow in More's footsteps. More could, even by Ferguson's own reasoning, simply be another member of this growing tradition of abolitionist verse. In opposition to Ferguson's claim that More's poem is a blueprint for later poems, I would argue that it is one work in a range of responses to the abolitionist movement during this period and further shows the diverse nature of the genre.

Yet perhaps what is striking about More's verse is that it was commissioned by a political body as part of a strategy for social change. More impacted upon the public realm of politics by infusing her pleas for abolition with more private details such as the suffering of women, the emphasis on feelings, and the destruction of the family. More attempted to end African suffering and British wrongdoing by appealing to the sympathetic, sensitive sides of her readers. Yet More's goal of

⁴⁰ Ferguson, 146.

parliamentary action still maintained its political impetus. Her plan for societal progress in the realms of politics and commerce is bolstered, not hindered, by her emphasis on a more “feminine” approach to reform.

By accentuating these elements in relation to her plan for societal change, More indirectly speaks of gender discrepancies in her own society. For example, a subtle gendered message is located in the following lines: “Does matter govern spirit? or is mind / Degraded by the form to which ‘tis join’d?”(65–66). Although she is referring to the Africans’ capacity to think, she could equally be suggesting that women have not been afforded reason as freely as men in her own society. Or, perhaps More’s insistence on women’s reason, as conveyed within her *Strictures*, creates a justification to extend the same claim to Africans. Another example of More’s polemical tone is evident when she calls on abolition to be widespread: “Shall Britain, where the soul of Freedom reigns, / Forge chains for others she herself disdains?”(251–52). More’s cry for freedom is extended to all in Britain and abroad.

Perhaps it could be argued that More, rather than writing a blueprint for other women to follow, provided further impetus for women to get involved in the debate. Even Ferguson writes that “perhaps, her verse inspired female contemporaries who were equally committed to the cause. Without the weight of her authority and influence—and the very warm reception the poem received—women less self-confident might have shied away from a public voicing.”⁴¹ It could be argued that the 1788 texts in support of the bill were the start of a new impulse of abolitionist writings which were previously unfocused in women’s poetry and which would extend through the 1850s.

⁴¹ Moira Ferguson, “British Women Writers and an Emerging Abolitionist Discourse,” *The Eighteenth Century* 33, no. 1 (1992): 11.

Ann Yearsley: Sympathy for a Suffering African Family Improves Society

More's protégée Ann Yearsley wrote a distinctly different poem in 1788 entitled "A Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave Trade."⁴² In this work, Yearsley more poignantly describes human suffering and sadness through a personal perspective. Yearsley bases her argument for abolition on feelings of sympathy and empathy. It is Yearsley's more intimate, personal poem that convincingly delivers the basic argument of sympathy for slaves and the critical need to end slavery.

Yearsley's "Inhumanity," written in blank verse, beseeches the people of Bristol to appease the suffering of slaves by terminating the inhumane trade. In contrast to More, Yearsley believes that the word of freedom should be spread among communities and not be displayed as a righteous act of Parliament. She uses a fictional character, Luco, and his family to supply a name to the slave and give her argument a more personal tone. Yearsley speaks of the responses to emotion and the suffering of others through a deeper examination into the psyches of slaves. More, in her more generalised approach, does not dare become that familiar with the agonised captives in her poem "Slavery." Alternatively, Yearsley describes the thoughts of slaves, a closeness More avoids. Indeed, Yearsley uses the concept of feeling and reason in the captives more readily than her mentor, who shies away from the association. Therefore, Yearsley feels moving compassion for their distress. While at the end of her poem Yearsley blames England's commerce, trade, and government, she ultimately returns the power of abolition to the public.

Yearsley addresses the inhabitants of her native town of Bristol directly when she states,

⁴² Ann Yearsley, "A Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave Trade" (London: G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1788).

Yet, Bristol, list! nor deem Lactilla's soul
Lessen'd by distance; snatch her rustic thought,
Her crude ideas, from their panting state,
And let them fly in wide expansion;

(9–12)

She admits that her uneducated verse may be unrefined, but she still desires for her message to emanate beyond Bristol, a main port of the slave trade. Furthermore, Yearsley injects her verse with a very personalised voice and the narrator's proclamations can be considered the poet's own, especially in the tradition of expressive criticism. Yearsley uses sympathetic sentiment to strike a chord with her readers and convey her deepest passions against the slave trade. In fact, her own heart feels pangs of sadness: "O'er suff'ring *man* / My soul with sorrow bends!"(47–48). Her use of italics emphasises her belief that Africans are indeed humans, while it also connects the British with the Africans under the order of humankind. Therefore, her parable of Luco is all the more compelling to her readers.

The tale of Luco's plight enables the victimisation of blacks to be personalised and sentimentalised as in Knipe's poetic tale of African warriors. Yearsley also imagines a slave captured and placed aboard a ship bound for distant shores. Although he is fictitious, his story gives meaning to personal suffering and pain. Luco, his parents, and his wife Incilanda, are a familial unit. They feel love and caring for one another, and consequently share "mutual sentiment"(142). Yearsley delves into Luco's past to introduce the reader to his mourning family back in Africa. After he has been captured, it is revealed that "Ten pale moons /...since to his generous breast / He clasp'd the tender maid, and whisper'd love"(139–41). Luco's separation is a loss for himself as well as his family.

Frequently, Yearsley chooses to approach the subject of domestic hardship and emotional loss through the women close to Luco: "See Incilanda! artless maid,

my soul / Keeps pace with thee, and mourns”(125–26). Yearsley’s and Incilanda’s souls are joined; as females they can relate to each other through the pangs of family separation and hardship. Yearsley even commands Incilanda’s mind to stop pining for Luco’s return: “Down, down, / Intruding Memory!”(161–62). The internal workings of the mind bring pain to Incilanda:

Luco’s form
Pursues her, lives in restless thought, and chides
Soft consolation. Banish’d from his arms,
She seeks the cold embrace of death; her soul
Escapes in one sad sigh.

(198–202)

The emotionalised and internalised modes of pain become overwhelming and Incilanda consequently turns to death as a relief from the agony she feels. Luco’s mother feels intense emotional pain, as well. She unsuccessfully searches for Luco and finds only “love, fear, hope, holding alternate rage / In her too-anxious bosom”(118–19).

Yet it is Luco’s inner suffering and silence that Yearsley finds too much to bear:

Luco stood,
Leaning upon his hoe, while mem’ry brought,
In piteous imag’ry, his aged father,
His poor fond mother, and his faithful maid:
The mental group in wildest motion set
Fruitless imagination; fury, grief,
Alternate shame, the sense of insult, all
Conspire to aid the inward storm; yet words
Were no relief, he stood in silent woe.

(244–52)

As Luco remembers his father, mother, and Incilanda, his yearning for them stirs his emotions and imagination. His feelings of anger toward his captors mix with the imagery of his family. Significantly, Luco’s words do not have the power to change his situation; he must remain in silence and languish under slavery. Yearsley’s

attempts to provide Luco, and indeed slaves in general, with a voice seem to have failed.

She blames societal regulations for the current miseries caused by the slave trade and forcefully exclaims,

Custom, Law,
Ye blessings, and ye curses of mankind,
What evils do ye cause? We feel enslaved,
Yet move in your direction.

(18–21)

These lines have a significant polemical undertone that speaks of the hardships of the English people under the current governmental structure. Edicts that “preach up filial piety”(22) have encouraged the British nation to uphold its outdated beliefs to the point where citizens feel “enslaved” themselves. Yearsley once more identifies with the African slave; as a woman in England, she feels trapped in a social system to whose mores she must adhere. This assertion that the English can feel like captives in their own country powerfully connects the suffering of slaves with the societal restrictions placed on Britons.

Indeed, Yearsley does blame the laws of England for the sufferings of many. Britain’s refusal to see the destruction of slaves’ lives as an injustice to humankind incenses Yearsley and prompts her to write persuasively against the government:

Is this an English law, whose guidance fails
When crimes are swell’d to magnitude so vast,
That *Justice* dare not scan them? Or does *Law*
Bid *Justice* an eternal distance keep
From England’s great tribunal, when the slave
Calls loud on *Justice only*? Speak, ye few
Who fill Britannia’s senate, and are deem’d
The fathers of your country!

(378–85)

In this passage, she addresses the members of Parliament directly as she urges them to

Speak out against the slave trade and represent the slave whose pleas for help are not heeded.

The “destructive system”(368) of commerce that operates in Britain also comes under attack. Yearsley harangues the traders themselves and anticipates a defensive response:

I know the crafty merchant will oppose
The plea of nature to my strain, and urge
His toils are for his children: the soft plea
Dissolves my soul—*but when I sell a son,*
Thou God of nature, let it be my own!

(75–79)

The assertion that the slave traders do not possess a conscience generates a cogent petition to abolish slavery. Moreover, like some of her fellow abolitionist poets, Yearsley aligns feeling with the language of commerce and economy. As the following excerpt and the one above reveal, the purchase of a human life becomes significantly more reproachable when emotions are involved:

The wish'd-for gold, purchase of human blood!
Away, thou seller of mankind! Bring on
Thy daughter to this market! bring thy wife!
Thine aged mother though of little worth,
With all thy ruddy boys! Sell them, thou wretch,
And swell the price of Luco!

(82–87)

Tauntingly, Yearsley nominates the trader's family for the selling block to increase the value of the slave. This is a market dealing in human lives whose “base supports”(369) supply England's commercial wants. Interestingly, in Yearsley's estimation, the trader's female family members are not worth much in this exchange. Because the trader supports an objectionable trade, the women close to him retain less worth as members of his deplorable family. All the more reason for Yearsley's readers to endorse the abolitionist cause.

Shrewdly, it is for an improvement of both cultures that Yearsley argues throughout this poem which challenges the slave trade and England's current systems. Up to this point, her emphases on slavery's impact on the female members of the family and her strong identification with slaves all support a reading of her work as expressly polemical. Yet it is at the end of the poem, as Yearsley places the possibility for abolition into the hands of Bristoleans, where her wider message to improve both nations is most efficaciously displayed. Her resounding sentiment is for the English society to rise up and improve the lives of many:

Hail, social love! true soul of *order*, hail!
Thy softest emanations, pity, grief,
Lively emotion, sudden joy, and pangs,
Too deep for language, are thy own: then rise,
Thou gentle angel! spread thy silken wings
O'er drowsy *man*, breathe in his *soul*, and give
Her God-like pow'rs thy animating force,
To banish Inhumanity.

(389-96)

Deepest emotions, not just those able to be expressed on the page, will ultimately provide man with the power to eliminate human suffering. Yearsley establishes a community of people teeming with emotions that will be the harbingers of "universal good"(415). She beseeches the people of Bristol to "touch the soul of man"(420) by communicating through "heart-felt sympathy"(422). It is only in this way that abolition can be realised.

In conclusion, in Yearsley's heartfelt plea to the community of Bristol to find sympathy with the Africans' plight, she presents an intimate look at the lives of one fictional family torn apart by the slave trade in order to connect the people of England with the victims in Africa. Her close examination of the inner workings of the hearts and minds of Luco's family give the reader a sense of overwhelming, profound pain. With biting depictions of the traders' sordid business and a description of Parliament

that leaves doubt of their power to propitiate society's ailments, the reader, and hence the wider community, remain the last hope for the slave. Social love must reign over those who trade in human lives and those who refuse to wield their political power. Through literature, Yearsley hopes to inspire other Britons to embrace abolitionist sentiment and ultimately improve their society.

The Falconars: Harriet Appeals to the Old England, Maria Envisions the New

The same desire for social harmony is expressed in the two abolitionist poems of the sisters Harriet and Maria Falconar, aged fourteen and seventeen respectively.⁴³ Although it is tempting to lump their poems together in the analytical style of Ferguson, these works must be recognised as distinct from each other even though they are both entitled "Slavery A Poem." Moreover, the goal of Romantic-period women poets to promote commonality, yet assert diversity is clearly evident when the poems are examined separately. Similarities are found as both of the youthful, eager poets aspire to join other literary calls for abolition by advocating the importance of sympathy and community. They both incorporate the common themes of familial separation, the reputation of England, and the evils of commerce into their verse. Yet significant differences are apparent, as well. Harriet's goal is to ensure the passage of the abolition bill. She reconstructs Britain's standing as a land of reason and social joy through past literary figures. In a similar vein to Hannah More, Harriet uses images of light to signify a brighter future for England. She concludes that multiple societal changes need to occur if abolition is to succeed. Maria, on the other hand, chooses to confirm England as a land of sympathy and humanity. In her unique verse, Maria wages a spiritual war of emotions to symbolise the fight for freedom. As she

⁴³ Harriet Falconar and Maria Falconar, *Poems on Slavery* (London: Egertons, Murray, and J. Johnson, 1788).

strives to inspire humanity and compassion through a first-person narration, her creative vision develops into a passionate call for abolition.

To begin, Harriet pragmatically opens with a direct praise to the “noble few”(1) who have fought as “protectors of our sacred laws”(2). She not only recognises the need for political action, but also for wider support in the cause. She urges the parliamentarians to “Let not the genial warmth, the latent fire, / That glows in Britain’s valiant sons, expire”(5–6). The intimation of the bravery of England’s soldiers helps to support her claims that England is a land worthy of praise. This honourable distinction must now be assured by abolishing slavery. Her poem frequently harks back to the impending bill in Parliament in an effort to ensure its passage and uphold the “right of man”(60). Harriet claims, “A deed like this shall swell the trump of fame”(78). Moreover, it is also a “deed that could impart / Reviving vigour to the drooping heart”(202–03) and “Give peace and freedom to an injur’d land!”(215). Abolition offers both esteem to those who uphold it (the British people) and vitality to those it physically affects (the suffering slaves). Ultimately, she believes that “heav’nly liberty’s celestial ray [will] / Beam o’er the world one pure eternal day!”(218–19).

Frequently, Harriet uses images of light, such as “glows,” “ray,” and “beam,” to emphasise the once genial aspects of African life. She recalls an earlier time in Africa when

fair Peace propitious smil’d,
And social joy the tedious hour beguil’d;
On them bright pleasure cast her fairest ray,
Soft as the rosy beam of op’ning day;

(19–22)

Notably, she does not use images of darkness to symbolise the sufferings of slaves or to refute slavery. Instead, Harriet prudently emphasises lightness and a brighter future

for both nations to encourage support in the cause. Furthermore, in order to formulate her argument that abolition is the wisest choice for England, she appeals to the reader's intellectual side by presenting reason as an illustrious endowment:

To man superior reason's light was giv'n,
Reason, the noblest gift of bounteous heav'n;
Unfailing beam, bright intellectual ray,
Thou steady guide through errors devious way;
(47–50)

In other words, bright reason will direct man to avoid the mistakes of slavery. The light of freedom will drench the world when the trade of humans ends.

Harriet uses a "tree of commerce" to symbolise the spreading of the trade, the allure of the gains, and slavery's ultimate hold on society:

The tree of commerce spreads its ample shade;
Unsparing plenty bends the lofty brow,
And wealth bright glitters on each golden bough;
.
And added lustre to the British throne;
(157–61)

The origins of the trade were connected to the growing economy, which did not immediately reveal its dangerous side. Alluding to biblical references, Harriet describes the moment when the business of slavery tempted those unable to ignore its deceiving appeal:

On ev'ry leaf the tempting manna hung
In golden dyes each beauteous blossom sprung;
The flow'rs of brightest hue oppression nam'd,
Yet from the tree the rank of commerce claim'd;
Led by the fair deceit beneath its shade,
With eager eye the slaves of av'rice stray'd;
This fatal fruit was loveliest to the view,
That on the spreading tree of commerce grew;
(170–77)

The term "manna," a substance which supplied the Israelites with crucial sustenance in a biblical story, usually denotes a type of spiritual nourishment or benefit.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. "manna."

Harriet's usage of the term here, in conjunction with the words "tempting" and "fatal fruit" impart a more ominous tone. To end the slave trade's hold on the economy, the only solution is to rip the tree from the ground: "Tear ev'ry fibre from the verdant root, / And blast each dang'rous blossom ere it shoot"(206-07). This destruction of the tree's vital root system implies a detour from an emphasis on religion as a guiding influence in society and alludes to the need of more vigorous and direct action.

Hence, Harriet's outlook for England involves a revival of "the joys of friendship and the bliss of love"(217). She envisions a return to the times when "Shakespeare struck his soul-commanding lyre," "immortal Milton sung," "native genius glow[ed] in Hayley's page," and "In Swift's own strains, a second Pope ar[o]se"(139-45). Her verse joins the works of these illustrious bards in forging an honourable name for Britain through the literary canon. This establishment of a history of writers ensures that Harriet's own abolitionist work will endure.

Yet it is not just these male authors whom she uses as leverage for her own work. She calls upon a female member of the royal family, Queen Charlotte, to extend feelings of sympathy to the wider masses:

Thine is compassion's sympathetic sigh,
The melting tear that beams in pity's eye;
The heart like thine, that feels another's pain,
Hears not distress'd misfortune plead in vain;
(69-72)

With her assistance, Harriet's lines will inspire and stand the test of time:

Virtues like thine shall wake the sounding lyre,
Each bosom glow with emulative fire;
And, swell'd with themes like this, the poet's page
Remain admir'd through each succeeding age.
(79-82)

Charlotte's heart feels the sufferings of the slave. It is hoped that this sentiment will be duplicated by her subjects and reflected in everlasting verse.

Harriet's developing confidence as a young poet is evident in this poem. She not only aligns herself with some of Britain's most famous male writers, but she also calls upon royalty to become a sympathetic ally. The signs of a more polemical voice are evident but subtle. In Harriet's estimation, Queen Charlotte will spread her sensibilities to the people and spark abolitionist action. Since Harriet supports the political power of the forthcoming bill, she primarily advances a liberal, yet structured plea for human liberty. Although the passage of the bill will ensure England's reputation as a virtuous nation, writers like herself can convey honourable qualities through their canonical works. Essentially, Harriet believes that her abolitionist vision will be realised when Parliament passes the bill, the monarchy spreads sympathy among its subjects, the contamination of commerce is remedied, and literature survives to tell the glories of liberty. An elaborate collaboration of these diverse communities—governmental, monarchical, commercial, and literary—will prove an end to slavery.

On the other hand, Harriet's older sister Maria relies less on the established systems in England and envisions a society empowered by freedom, philanthropy, and humanity. In Maria's poem, feelings personified as female figures fight against the immorality gripping Europe in a battle of good against evil that retains a religious resonance. Indeed, unlike her sister Harriet who seems somewhat sceptical of divine intervention, Maria embraces a more spiritual and emotional cure for the ills of the enslavement of Africans.

Maria's poem begins with an invocation to "soft Philanthropy... / ...whence all our social pleasures spring"(1-2). Although she states "to thee I sing"(1) in a quite certain manner, Maria's confidence falters as she rhetorically asks, "Shall I attempt to join the favour'd throng, / And pay the tribute of an artless song?"(5-6). Although

she wants to use poetry as her vehicle for self expression, she is unsure of her abilities to belong to a company of writers who have been “Borne by superior genius”(16). She perseveres to “find a place / Amidst the wreath each bard has twin’d to grace / The brow of sympathy”(17–19). Certainly, she can situate herself amongst these writers for “soft humanity inspires”(26) her poem.

While she aligns herself with fellow writers in order to strengthen the cause and build community in the literary world, Maria necessarily places herself in opposition to a

vile assassin, stain’d with num’rous crimes,
Who bears the shaft of death to distant climes;
Whose flinty breast, unknown to social love,
No tears, no pray’rs, no suff’rings, e’er can move.

(37–40)

Not only does she stress that she is “fraught with feeling”(30), but also that “compassion reign[s]”(31) within her heart. In contrast, proponents of slavery do not embrace compassion. The slave owner lacks a soft heart and cannot feel affection; it seems as if he will never change his criminal ways.

Yet Maria remains steadfast in her belief that sympathy can connect the people of England with Africans: “For, all that Britons feel, their souls inspire, / The same affection and the same desire”(55–56). Britons have the ability to feel, and it is this human quality—not the slave trade—which links them with the people of Africa. Maria’s vision of feelings as the link between the nations is similar to previous uses of sensibility to link the public with the private. Furthermore, Maria feminises the debate by describing “Britannia” as a motherly figure “whose maternal arms / Clasp every virtue, dress’d in heavenly charms”(43–44). In other words, Britain can comfort the suffering masses, rather than enslave them.

To this end, Maria envisions a more spiritual future for England. Britain herself is wrapped in divine goodness, and even Maria's muse "tunes her lyre to harmony divine"(4). Not surprisingly, the defenders of slavery are "foes of heav'n"(101). Therefore, the political conflict between the upholders of slavery and the supporters of abolition is played out through a battle of personified and feminised emotions that ultimately follow religion's direction. The reader learns:

Once Superstition, in a fatal hour,
O'er Europe rais'd the sceptre of her power;
She reign'd triumphant minister of death,
And peace and pleasure faded in her breath;

(117-20)

"Superstition" is portrayed as a powerful, female tyrant who destroys happiness with a mere exhalation of air, rather than her might. However, "Superstition" can only affect the mind and outward beauty as revealed in the following lines: "The bud of beauty wither'd ere it bloom'd; / The brilliant eye,.../ Shed all its lustre," "The smiling lip.../ Grew pale," "And fond remembrance / Drew back the soul just soaring to the sky"(122-32). "Superstition," a belief in the supernatural rather than spiritual, can only rule outside of heaven and not within the breast. Of course, within "the swell'd throbbing heart,"(142) "Sensibility" prevails.

Consequently, "Religion" summons "Freedom" and "Charity" to challenge the tyrant "Superstition" and her followers "Despair," "Hypocrisy," and "Enthusiasm." Engagingly, Maria arranges a world in which religion, freedom, and charity fight for an environment in which abolition can prevail as long as superstition, despair, hypocrisy, and enthusiasm are driven out with slavery. Britain has the means to become the first country to banish these pernicious qualities as long as religion retains dominion:

But when, to grace the world, Religion shone,
In Britain first she deign'd to fix her throne;

Freedom and Charity, at her command,
 Chas'd Superstition from the drooping land;
 Despair, as public discord ceas'd to sting,
 Beat the retiring gloom with raven wing;
 In vain, Enthusiasm disdain'd to fly,
 And roll'd the livid light'ning of her eye;
 In vain with phrenzy wild her fetters broke,
 And threaten'd horrid vengeance as she spoke;
 Religion bound her with her magic chain,
 And fix'd a period to the monster's reign.

(159–70)

In this passage, the reader sees the struggle against slavery dramatised by female personifications of abolition's strengths and slavery's weaknesses. "Freedom" and "Charity," two necessities in an abolitionist world, exterminate "Superstition" from England. So far, under "Superstition" and not religious rule, England has been a "drooping land" supporting slavery. Now that "public discord ceas'd to sting" and mutual abolitionist sentiment is gaining strength, "Despair" tries uselessly with the help of "Enthusiasm" to keep the "gloom" of slavery in England. Yet "Religion" finally captures these evil forces and "fix'd a period to the monster's reign." The rule of slavery is nearing its end and all that remains is for "Hypocrisy" to be beaten. Yet this is easily accomplished as "soon the fell contention" against abolitionist ideology "rag'd no more"(181). When the people of England embraced abolition, "liberty the victors garland wore"(182).

Interestingly, the players in this spiritual conflict are all female. Sensibility, freedom, charity, and religion are all positive qualities and, when their personifications are triumphant, make for an improved Britain. Additionally, Britain is endowed with maternal, nurturing, and sympathetic instincts; it is a country destined to embrace a more "feminine" future. Indeed, Maria emphasises this point at the conclusion of her verse when she describes the liberation of the slave:

Instruct him, goddess, on his native plain,
 To sing the glories of a George's reign;

Tell him, at his command you sought their shore,
Their wrongs to pity, and their rights restore;

(243–46)

Although she does acknowledge the monarchy, the “Goddess of Freedom”(233) in these lines claims more agency than the king himself to free the African people.

Virtuous feelings win out in the battle against slavery.

In conclusion, Maria Falconar’s bold poem which voices her abolitionist message makes for an intriguing conception of the need to end slavery in England. The first-person articulation of her desire to belong to the established, erudite literary sphere allows her initial uncertainty to emerge more resolute and her verse seem more personalised. Maria symbolises the struggle to end slavery through a spiritual and emotional conflict. Her belief in the capacity of religion to restore liberty in England and Africa is realised when freedom is triumphant. The establishment of different groupings of emotions under slavery and abolition constructs a world in which feeling is paramount and guided by religious morality. Powerful emotions destroy slavery and restore liberty. This emphasis on feeling perhaps formulates Maria’s argument for abolition into a more polemical work than her sister’s which primarily relies on reformations of the established realms of government and commerce.

When analysed separately, the striking thematic features of these poems are readily apparent. Harriet’s more straightforward piece focuses on ensuring the passage of the bill against the slave trade. Although she refers to religious parable, her poem concentrates on improving governmental policy and commerce. She uses images of light and nature to target abolitionist sentiment. Alternatively, Maria’s work relies on emotional response in order to arouse abolitionist energy as she figuratively wages a spiritual war of feelings to symbolise the fight for freedom. Maria’s more personal and creative verse calls for widespread sympathy to alleviate

the ills of slavery. When placed together, the poems resonate a developed abolitionist argument that not only captures the emotional stakes of the slave trade, but also illuminates the political changes needed for abolition to triumph.

Helen Maria Williams: Blurring Gender in the Politics of Abolition

Helen Maria Williams's "A Poem on the Bill Lately Passed for Regulating the Slave-Trade,"⁴⁵ the final poem of 1788 to be discussed, maintains a decidedly political focus as Williams praises the accomplishments of the advocates of the bill in getting it approved. Several passages refer to the law and serve as reminders to readers that resolute progress can be made in the fight against slavery. Yet Williams acknowledges that more political strides need to be achieved. Although she does stress the need for compassion and sympathy in a series of moving passages against commerce and the traders themselves, her ultimate goal is freedom for all through legal and political means.

Williams acknowledges Britain as the first country in Europe to have aided the plight of subjugated Africans by regulating the number of slaves allowed to be shipped to the West Indies. However, she reminds her readers that this notable advancement is only "*one* dire scene for ever clos'd"(34) in the annals of slavery. The italics emphasise the need for the passage of more abolitionist legislation. Credit, nevertheless, is given to the younger William Pitt, Prime Minister during the last two decades of the eighteenth century, and Charles Lennox, a crusader for reform, for ensuring the passage of the bill. Pitt's accomplishments include signing the "deeds of Mercy, that embrace / A distant sphere, an alien race"(59–60). His political acts in England compassionately "embrace" the African people. Consequently, his success

⁴⁵ Helen Maria Williams, "A Poem on the Bill Lately Passed for Regulating the Slave-Trade" (London: T. Cadell, 1788).

blends the nurturing qualities of a woman with the political achievements of a man.

Lennox also appears quite feminised:

*His bosom for the Captive bleeds,
He, Guardian of the injur'd! pleads
With all the force that Genius gives,
And warmth that but with Virtue lives;*

(73–76)

He possesses refined sensibility within his “bosom,” yet retains “Genius,” as well.

Like Pitt, Lennox is an androgynous figure and one that stands as an example for Britain’s future. Therefore, their epicene identities allude to a withdrawal from an androcentric past and support a feminisation of Britain’s future.

While their political achievements take precedence, these two men are intriguingly portrayed by Williams as having a mixture of masculine and feminine qualities. Gender expectations are disturbed when Pitt and Lennox infuse emotion into their political acts. Williams’s aim here is to emphasise the changing attitudes toward gender within British society and the simultaneous social strides made by men in the political realm and by women in the literary culture. In this case, abolition is a co-operative process achieved by various communities of men and women, politicians and writers. Williams herself blurs these boundaries with her unabashedly political poem.

She claims that the recently enacted bill shines “Like the sweet Morn’s reviving beams, / That chase the hideous forms of night, / And promise day more richly bright”(82–84). Reminiscent of Harriet Falconar’s and More’s classification of abolition as a source of light, the excerpt here sees England’s past covered in darkness and its future illuminated by daylight. Not only did “consenting minds”(85) help to defend the bill, but the supporters felt “every pang another feels”(90), as well. Again, intellect is matched with emotion and shared sympathy. This Dissenting belief in

reason and rights hints at Williams's more radical inclination, although an extended argument for the rights of Dissenters is not explicitly stated throughout her poem. Still, Williams's goal is social reform through political means.

Yet she does not ignore the more emotional and heartfelt pleas for liberty and sympathy. In several poignant sections of her verse, Williams describes the piteous appeals of the slaves, the asperity of the traders, and the repellent nature of the trade in order to elicit an emotional response in her readers. In the following lines, Williams describes a slave's attempt to connect with his captor emotionally in a final effort to find human compassion in his oppressor and some relief from his agony:

In mute affliction, see him try
To read his new possessor's eye;
If one blest glance of mercy there,
One half-form'd tear may check despair!—

(253–56)

Touchingly, the slave tries in vain to find leniency or understanding in his master.

Williams asks, in a series of interrogations, how the rights of slaves can be instated when criminal behaviour is not prohibited and laws are too moderate:

Yet *why* on one poor chance must rest
The interests of a kindred breast?
Humanity's devoted cause
Recline on Humour's wayward laws?
To Passion's rules must Justice bend,
And life upon Caprice depend?—

(273–78)

For Williams, it is not merely the criminal behaviour of the traders that must be curbed, but likewise the laws of England must be altered. In an effort to invite the traders to change their wicked ways, she condemns commerce by employing the popular method of fusing sentiment and economy. The traders "think in gold the essence lies / From which extracted bliss shall rise"(281–82). Instead, she urges them to espouse mercy and

Risque something in her cause at last,
And thus atone for all the past;
Break the hard fetters of the Slave;
And learn the luxury to save!—

(303–06)

In other words, happiness is not to be found where human life is the “dire merchandise”(251). Whereas slavery promises false returns, philanthropy is heralded as a “luxury” in order to convince the gold-mongering trader that there is a profit—albeit emotional—in liberating man.

However, Williams returns once again to a more political argument, relying on the power of the written word to sustain England as a freedom-loving land:

LOV'D BRITAIN! whose protecting hand
Stretch'd o'er the Globe, on AFRIC's strand
The honour'd base of Freedom lays,
Soon, soon, the finish'd fabric raise!

(351–54)

England is presented as a nurturing figure offering support in the fight to eschew slavery world-wide. In Williams's vision, the laws of England symbolically form a flag which is raised in triumph in the name of freedom. Again, England's political deeds align with literary pleas for abolition.

Therefore, in Williams's poem celebrating the small step taken towards total abolition, one can see a more radical and political voice infused with an emotional plea for the ultimate termination of slavery. Although Williams's main goal is to praise the accomplishments already made against the slave trade, she still desires more parliamentary action in the form of further laws. These laws, with the support of sympathetic Britons and emotionally-reformed traders, will build Britain's reputation world-wide as a land of freedom for all. Even the hardened trader is asked to feel for mercy by seeing philanthropy as a benefit or reward. Intriguingly, Pitt and Lennox, two potentially emasculated characters, are depicted not as inferior men, but

as effective, emotional politicians. The mixture of masculine with feminine in the portraits of two of England's leading political reformers suggests that society is witnessing a feminisation of culture with the changing attitudes about slavery. By the end of her poem, Williams's argument—that a collaboration of the diverse social elements of emotion, reason, politics, and literature can pass another bill—becomes all the more convincing.

Anna Barbauld: A Darker Representation of Britain and a Bleak Outlook

The departure from the works of 1788 begins with Anna Barbauld's poem "Epistle to William Wilberforce, Esq. on the Rejection of the Bill for abolishing the Slave Trade" (1791).⁴⁶ Barbauld (1743–1825) was a poet and essayist who was educated by her father Dr. Aikin, a minister and teacher at the Warrington Academy for Dissenters. Barbauld and her husband, a reverend, established a successful school for boys where she taught some female pupils. She had a wide circle of literary friends, many of whom were bluestockings. Although her poetic works were well-written and often humorous, Barbauld has been called "one of the most neglected writers of her day" by one of her biographers.⁴⁷ She strongly supported abolition and the rights of Dissenters throughout her life and within her writings.

Whereas Williams found reason to praise the passage of Sir William Dolben's bill to regulate the slave trade, Barbauld finds disappointment when Wilberforce's stricter bill abolishing the trade does not pass in the Commons. Barbauld's "Epistle to William Wilberforce" belongs to a history of abolitionist verse which linked

⁴⁶ Anna Letitia Barbauld, "Epistle to William Wilberforce, Esq. on the Rejection of the Bill for abolishing the Slave Trade" (London, J. Johnson, 1791).

⁴⁷ Barbara Brandon Schnorrenberg, "Barbauld, Anna Laetitia," in *A Dictionary of British and American Women Writers 1660–1800*, ed. Janet Todd (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1984), 37. All biographical information taken from this source.

generations of writers to an on-going political issue. However, her work deviates from previous symbols of progress such as More's representation of the bill as a source of freedom, Harriet Falconar's view of literature as spreading the glories of the end of slavery, and Williams's creation of a flag out of Britain's abolitionist laws. Instead, Barbauld chooses to intermix images of sexuality with her arguments against the corruptive powers of the slave trade in order to argue for change. Her intense petitions against commerce and empire are combined with stark descriptions of the physicality of women and the body, thus focusing the work's arguments within a female discourse. Yet Barbauld's contrast of female sexuality with domesticity succeeds in emphasising the dangers of slavery. It becomes evident that her objective is to offer an alternative but bleak outlook of the future, rather than her abolitionist sisters' brighter forecasts, in order to highlight the problems of slavery and empire. Barbauld's poem is a striking interpretation of the need for societal change.

Barbauld's sense of frustration at the failure of the recent bill is evident from the first lines of the poem when she urges Wilberforce to stop fighting for abolition: "Cease, Wilberforce, to urge thy generous aim! / Thy Country knows the sin, and stands the shame!"(1-2). Abandoning Wilberforce and ineffectual England itself potentially situates Barbauld's poem as an unpatriotic piece, unlike More's and Williams's poems which both sustain a political focus. However, Barbauld also concedes that even the "Preacher, Poet, Senator in vain / Has rattled in her sight the Negro's chain"(3-4). Collective petitioning by these diverse communities does not seem to have been capable of ending the trade either. Therefore, Barbauld's intentions as a writer of abolitionist verse are somewhat indistinct. However, it becomes evident that her primary desire is to illuminate society's depravity and the dangers of commerce, not necessarily to argue in vain, like Wilberforce, for abolition.

In taking this alternative approach, Barbauld locates herself in direct opposition to England's societal structure. Her challenging imagery can perhaps be attributed to her more radical political leanings. Ultimately, she desires great societal improvements for her country.

Further on in her poem, Barbauld emphasises again that

In vain, to push to birth thy great design,
Contending chiefs, and hostile virtues join;
All, from conflicting ranks, of power possess
To rouse, to melt, or to inform the breast.

(21-24)

Interestingly, Barbauld conjoins the language of war with the image of childbirth. In striving to give life to a political view, the proponents of the bill have tried unsuccessfully to arouse the emotions of citizens. This incitement is a very physical, violent birthing of ideas which does not succeed in uniting the society against slavery. It would seem that trying to introduce emotion and sympathy within one's "breast" has not been a viable solution. Indeed, throughout her poem, Barbauld primarily avoids the emotional arguments for abolition, but uses representations of physical distress to illuminate the evils of slavery.

Barbauld habitually utilises physical representations to illustrate her points. For example, Africa is represented as a female figure not unlike Cleopatra. Ophidian imagery abounds throughout Barbauld's account of when Africa, in a moment of despair, turned against Britain in a brutal attempt to quell its desires for the trade:

And injur'd Afric, by herself redrest,
Darts her own serpents at her Tyrant's breast.
Each vice, to minds deprav'd by bondage known,
With sure contagion fastens on his own;
In sickly languors melts his nerveless frame,
And blows to rage impetuous Passion's flame:
Fermenting swift, the fiery venom gains
The milky innocence of infant veins;
There swells the stubborn will, damps learning's fire,
The whirlwind wakes of uncontroul'd desire,

Sears the young heart to images of woe,
And blasts the buds of Virtue as they blow.

(45–56)

In this passage, Africa's plan fails to curb the "contagion" of corruption and commerce which has spread through both lands. In fact, Africa's aggressive attempts to dissuade Britain only succeed in encouraging uncontrolled desires, destroying virtue, and denying sympathy. The "milky innocence" of Britain is now tainted. This passage, while asserting the malignancy of the trade, at the same time connotes a message against the excesses of sexuality. As Kate Davies argues, "[w]ith her poisonous serpents functioning as the signs of her uncontrollable sexuality, she seduces and further corrupts her European 'Tyrants'. 'Passion's flame' is thus also the unquenchable fire of commercial desire which creates the corruptions of a trade in human bodies."⁴⁸

Yet it is often not clear which nation incites the other to commit these iniquitous acts and spread the pernicious trade. Davies asks, "Who is the source of corrupt desire, of 'vice' and 'contagion': Cleopatra, with her dangerous sexuality, or the British traders with their excessive greed?"⁴⁹ A female figure who is described as being "At once the Scythian, and the Sybarite"(62) is important not simply as the unconventional figure of a plantation wife, but because her person blends the disparate images of rampant sexuality and domesticity. She has been doubly affected by African allure and British influence. Within this character, Barbauld communicates her belief that the British figure of femininity has been corrupted by Africa's temptations. In other words, the British woman has been tainted by the diseased commerce which, by necessity, affects her daily life. At one point, Barbauld

⁴⁸ Kate Davies, "A moral purchase: femininity, commerce and abolition, 1788–1792," in *Women, Writing and the Public Sphere, 1700–1830*, ed. Elizabeth Eger et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 148.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

shockingly goes as far as to compare the commerce of the slave trade to the rape of a woman: "No heart-expanding scenes their eyes must prove / Of thriving industry, and faithful love: / But shrieks and yells disturb the balmy air"(79–81). In these two examples of the corrupted plantation wife and the raped woman, Barbauld presents the female in a jeopardised position. Therefore, if the female is not a picture of virtuous sympathy, then Barbauld cannot offer the feminisation of British culture as a reprisal of the slave trade.

Even Africa and England are represented as female nations who harbour feelings of greed, desire, and vice because of their commercial concerns. With reference to England's continuing use of slavery Barbauld comments,

She knows and she persists—Still Afric bleeds,
Uncheck'd, the human traffic still proceeds;
She stamps her infamy to future time,
And on her harden'd forehead seals the crime.

(15–18)

It is a caustic trade which causes injury to Africa and leaves a mark of disgrace upon England. The destructive trade, Barbauld confirms, will affect Britain's future.

Hope is not a theme which Barbauld chooses to develop. On the contrary, the trade is often described as an incurable disease that has spread like an infection:

Corruption follows with gigantic stride,
And scarce vouchsafes his shameless front to hide:
The spreading leprosy taints ev'ry part,
Infects each limb, and sickens at the heart.

(96–99)

In this account, commerce affects both the physical and emotional sides of those involved in the trade. After intimating the evils of slavery and commerce, Barbauld offers no solution to her readers. She urges Wilberforce to retire his efforts for his "merit stands, no greater and no less, / Without, or with the varnish of success"(114–

15). Barbauld informs Wilberforce that the pages of history will report “how you strove, and that you strove in vain”(123).

Therefore, Barbauld advances the necessity of societal change by emphasising the corruption of commerce, the perniciousness of rampant sexuality, and the malignancy of greed and vice. She does not stress the need for abolition through a feminisation of culture, an emphasis on sensibility, or a call for diversity like so many of her fellow women poets. Instead, by arguing that these aims are unachievable under the ideology of slavery, Barbauld presents a bold refutation of slavery and corrupted commerce. However, it is important to consider that her chief desire is to establish Britain as an uncomplicated nation without slavery. This involves restoring “Simplicity,” “Independence,” and “Freedom”(100–03). Barbauld envisions a world unsullied by commercial corruption and sexuality, yet struggles to find a workable plan to achieve this lofty goal. Her temporary solution is to represent the association of Africa and Britain as undesirable for both nations. During a time when it is too tempted by the evils of the slave trade, Britain cannot support diversity by accepting Africans as allies. Nor can women offer sympathy and femininity as alternative social characteristics to counter the baseness of this corrupt business. Indeed, Barbauld’s representations of women—a corrupted plantation wife, a raped woman, Africa and Britain as diseased and sexualised female figures—perhaps seem problematic at first glance and do not readily allow for a more feminist reading of her work. But, if her resolution means representing women in an abject light, then Barbauld has proved that she is willing to take this risk to improve both societies. Hopefully her work is not “in vain,” as she is so prone to mention, and society will purge its debauched practices, its overt sexual tendencies, and build an improved society without slavery or vice.

Mary Robinson: An Impossible Attempt to Mix Races Under Slavery

In contradistinction to Barbauld's use of sexuality and aggressiveness, Mary Robinson uses a love story of two Africans as the basis of her argument against slavery. In "The Negro Girl" (1800), Robinson gives a voice to oppressed Zelma and reasons through her emotive dialogue that slavery is the basis of sadness and grief for Africans.⁵⁰ In Zelma's case, she is torn apart from her captured lover Draco—not an uncommon example of domestic fracturing. However, the most unusual experience of Zelma's captivity is her owner's attempt to edify her to be his mistress in a selfish bid to integrate black and white. Yet, through Zelma's impassioned soliloquy, one realises that neither union will ever come to fruition. Although Robinson finds similarities in both races, she ultimately separates black and white in a drive for abolition.

Born in 1758, Robinson led a life marred by debt and scandal. As a young girl, she received her education at a school run by Hannah More. Although her increasingly dire family life drove the young Robinson to marry early, her husband's poor control of their finances landed them in debtors' prison. It was during this time that she began to write poetry. Soon after her release from incarceration, she was encouraged as an actress and performed numerous roles at the Drury Lane Theatre. Following one of her performances, the Prince of Wales desired to meet her, an affair developed, and Robinson became his mistress. After the end of the affair, Robinson was given an annuity; she still struggled to remain out of debt. During a journey abroad, she contracted an illness which left her paralysed for the remainder of her life. Writing provided comfort and a way to earn money until her death in 1801.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Mary Robinson, "The Negro Girl" (1800; reprint, with a foreword in *Verse*, vol. 4 *Slavery, Abolition & Emancipation*, ed. Alan Richardson, London: Pickering & Chatto, 1999), 259–67.

⁵¹ Ann B. Shteir, "Robinson, Mary," in *A Dictionary of British and American Women Writers 1660–1800*, ed. Janet Todd (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1984), 270–72.

In "The Negro Girl," Robinson uses linguistic clues to imply that in certain ways black and white people are alike. In the fifth stanza of her brief poem, Robinson chooses not to segregate Africans and Britons overtly, but instead she acknowledges the disparity between their social status:

'That some should sleep on beds of state,—
'Some, in the roaring Sea?
'Some, nurs'd in splendour, deal Oppression's blow,
'While worth and Draco pine – in Slavery and woe!
(stanza 5)

Although she discusses their differences, it is important to note her choice of the word "some." Robinson uses this word to signify both the oppressors and the oppressed, therefore hinting that they may indeed share similar qualities, or that they are both members of the human race.

Yet racial difference is what separates the two. Addressing Nature, Zelma asks, "Is it the dim and glossy hue / 'That marks him for despair?—"(stanza 8). Apparently, Zelma finds that skin colour is the only mark separating the two races for "Whate'er their TINTS may be, their SOULS are still the same!"(stanza 9). Indeed, Zelma declares Africans to be of the same intellectual capacity as their white counterparts:

'Thou gav'st, in thy caprice, the Soul
'Peculiarly enshrin'd;
'Nor from the ebon Casket stole
'The Jewel of the mind!
(stanza 7)

Nature has blessed Africans with not only a feeling soul, but also an intellect.

Therefore, when Zelma's captor attempts to educate her and cultivate her morals so that she will accept him as her lover, his plan fails. Zelma, pretending to communicate to her lover Draco, recalls this episode of education and rebellion:

'The Tyrant WHITE MAN taught my mind—
'The letter'd page to trace,—

‘He taught me in the Soul to find
‘No tint, as in the face:
‘He bade my Reason, blossom like the tree—
‘But fond affection gave, the ripen’d fruits to thee.

(stanza 13)

Remarkably, the white slave owner tries to rear his captive mistress, albeit for his own needs. Yet Zelma’s informed mind and impassioned soul prevent her from ever loving another; she will always be joined with Draco. Consequently, in an effort to force Zelma’s love, the slave owner sells Draco and he is shipped away from the fields. Finally, when Draco’s ship is caught in a storm, a violent death in the sea ends her story.

In this short versification of Zelma’s sad tale, Robinson is able to plea for abolition by using the intellectual capacity of Africans and their bleeding hearts as evidence of their human nature. An experiment in social organisation takes place via the slave owner’s attempt to influence Zelma and connect the white inhabitants with the black population of the plantation. Yet this intermingling of races is impractical under the ideology of slavery. Expressed alternatively, if one desires racial and social harmony, the practice of slavery must end. Therefore, diversity will only be successful in an abolitionist world. Although Robinson transcribes Zelma’s tale for the reader, Zelma’s words are the explanation of her own experience; her voice is merely encouraged with the simple help of Robinson’s verse. Even so, Zelma is a strong female protagonist, one who could be regarded as a champion of emancipation for intellectually and emotionally defying her captor.

Amelia Opie: A Slave’s Story of the Sugar Industry Educates British Children

The final poem of this investigation of women’s abolitionist verse is Amelia Opie’s “The Black Man’s Lament; or, How to Make Sugar,” written for children in

1826.⁵² Opie (1769–1853) was brought up in a strict Dissenting household and was mostly educated by her mother. Early in her childhood she had a fear of Africans, a fear which her mother promptly ended. This episode was recounted by Opie in her memoirs:

The African of whom I was so terribly afraid was the footman of a rich merchant from Rotterdam, who lived opposite our house; and, as he was fond of children, Aboar (as he was called) used to come up to speak to little missey as I stood at the door in my nurse's arms, a civility which I received with screams, and tears, and kicks. But as soon as my parents heard of this ill behaviour, they resolved to put a stop to it, and missey was forced to shake hands with the black the next time he approached her, and thenceforward we were very good friends. Nor did they fail to make me acquainted with negro history; as soon as I was able to understand, I was shown on the map where their native country was situated; I was told the sad tale of negro wrongs and negro slavery; and I believe that my early and ever-increasing zeal in the cause of emancipation was founded and fostered by the kindly emotions which I was encouraged to feel for my friend Aboar and all his race.⁵³

Opie's friendship with Aboar, despite her early fear of him, and her edification about African life, both prompted her as a woman poet to inform children of the evils of the sugar trade through the eyes of an enslaved African man.

Opie's poem explicates the workings of the sugar industry in order to declare its practices and the trade inhumane and proclaim abolition humanitarian. The enslaved protagonist of the poem, who represents the wider black race, tells his account of working in the plantations in order to elicit sympathy and compel Britain to end slavery. Opie's chapbook verse, with its accompanying illustrations, serves as

⁵² Amelia Opie, "The Black Man's Lament; or, How to Make Sugar" (1826; reprint, with a foreword in *Verse*, vol. 4 *Slavery, Abolition & Emancipation*, ed. Alan Richardson, London: Pickering & Chatto, 1999), 345–68.

⁵³ Amelia Opie, quoted in Duncan Wu, ed., *Romantic Women Poets: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1997), 345–46. In addition, all biographical information on Opie taken from Wu's anthology.

a means to educate Britain's youth of the evils of slavery, the production of sugar, and the repugnance of human bondage for purposes of encouraging abolition.

Opie bridges the gap between the two cultures by assisting the slave in explaining his captivity and labour. Essentially, she opens the channels of communication between the captive black man and the British children. Opie is convinced that if the enslaved African tells his own story, perhaps all Britons will therefore embrace abolition:

But, Negro slave! *thysself* shall tell,
Of past and present wrongs the story;
And would all British hearts could feel,
To *end* those wrongs were *Britain's glory*.

(13–16)

Sympathy will be the unifying force of abolitionist sentiment and Britain will be glorified by ending slavery.

However, for her young readers, Opie signifies good and bad by arranging separate communities of people. Therefore, the slave divides the world in black and white, subjugated and free, agonised and happy, caring and cruel. After the black people are captured and placed aboard ships bound for the West Indies, they are no longer independents, but a “degraded store / Of freemen, forc’d from Negro land”(31–32). In order to contextualise their plight, the slave’s and the Englishman’s daily lives are compared:

‘Who dares an English peasant flog,
Or buy, or sell, or steal away?
Who sheds his blood? treats him like a dog,
Or fetters him like beasts of prey?

‘He has a cottage, he a wife:
If child he has, that child is free.
I am depriv’d of married life,
And my poor child were *slave* like *me*.

(113–20)

His account of the disparaging experiences of a black slave, compared to the freedoms of an English peasant man, not only allows British children to understand a slave's degree of misfortune, but also connects and compares them to their black-slave adolescent counterparts.

Following this clear methodology, the slave broadens his strategy by speculating that if white men could understand and experience the torment of working in the sugar fields, then they might relieve the black man's suffering: "Oh, would I could / Make White men Negroes' miseries feel!"(127–28). This postulation marks another step towards offering sympathy as a unifying tool of British abolitionist sentiment. Opie realises that the entirety of the British population—abolitionists and slave drivers alike—must embrace the belief that human enslavement is unacceptable. Slavery, however, is more than just an improper practice. Intrepidly, the slave asks, "Then, where have we one legal right?"(145). Legal emancipation is a reasonable alleviation of the slave's condition.

In Opie's verse, therefore, her young readers can see the development of a rational argument for abolition. The voiced, yet enslaved, black man becomes not only an educator of British children, but also a spokesman for human rights on behalf of all enslaved men and women. His argument follows a logical and sensible design, offering a progression from a more pacific representation of racial difference to a call for lawful rights. In trying to build sympathy within British children reading his story, the slave himself becomes an impassioned advocate of emancipation. Indeed, the last stanza of the poem, when the slave is overcome with emotion from recounting his story, reiterates Opie's enduring message:

He ceas'd; for here his tears would flow,
And ne'er resum'd his tale of *ruth*.
Alas! it rends my heart to know
He only told a *tale of truth*.

(169–72)

Overcome with emotion, the slave must end his truthful account of the sufferings he has endured under slavery. In a world which enforces cruelty based on differences in outward appearance, it is hoped that Britain's youth can begin to support sympathy, understanding, and commonality for an abolitionist future.

ABOLITIONISM: DIVERSE PETITIONS FOR SOCIETAL IMPROVEMENT

In conclusion, this vexed period in British history witnessed a change in attitudes concerning racial others and women's societal influence. With several shifts in the operating societal structure, alterations in popular belief were inevitable. The abolitionist movement, by necessity, had to negotiate various societal transformations alongside its scheme for a better Britain if it was to succeed in ending slavery through popular support. Literature, designed to awaken an emotive response in the British people, was one particularly successful political tool used by several philanthropic associations to disperse abolitionist sentiment.

As the works above affirm, Romantic women poets believed in relating the irrefutable atrocities of slavery in the hopes of securing freedom for Africans and a better future for England. In addition to the familiar themes of severed families, infeasible societal structures, and offensive trading practices, I have illuminated the more distinctive leitmotifs such as the unique representations of community, the physical and emotional qualities of women, the correlation of emotion with commerce, and an emphasis on the "feminine" within these assertive poems on the pernicious nature of slavery. An examination of these motifs shifts the critical focus to enhance the understanding of sensibility, community, and diversity which are intermingled within British Romantic-period women's verse.

In their various poetic pleas for abolition, these women writers construct unique groups within the society. Through their formations of “imagined communities,” to borrow Benedict Anderson’s phrase, these women poets argue for both extended social diversity and intellectual and emotional collaboration in the abolitionist movement. For example, Knipe introduces just a few members of a tribal community as they fight for freedom on African soil. Her narrow examination of select tribal members particularises the slave and familiarises Africans in the eyes of British readers. Yearsley similarly examines a particular African family, but additionally urges the specific English port of Bristol to promote abolitionist sentiment. Her poem examines each cultural perspective in order to present a detailed and complete view of the ills of the trade at home and abroad. Her mentor More, on the other hand, concentrates on the communities in England such as the un-Christian traders, the parliamentarians, and the sympathisers in order to stir additional support for the bill. Her representations of Africans, as opposites to Britons, group all racial others in one indistinct, removed community. Opie also tends to segregate the different communities of black and white. However, unlike More whose ignorance and perhaps distrust of African culture is signified by her grouping of racial others as a whole, Opie uses the cultural differences of the two communities to bolster her abolitionist argument. Opie successfully demonstrates that the societies should not be joined by slavery, but instead should share an emancipated world. Intriguingly, Williams’s endeavour to coalesce the two populations also ends in the realisation that blacks and whites cannot coexist under the ideology of slavery. Harriet and Maria Falconar approach the formation of community from yet different perspectives. In order to emphasise the importance of their poems to the abolitionist movement, they form communities of writers and establish themselves as members of a prestigious

coterie of influential Britons. In joining other literary calls for abolition, their works help strengthen political impetus for the cause. In addition, Maria, in her inventive poem, pushes the concept of community even further by representing the emotional elements of the debate as warriors in a spiritual battle for freedom.

Without doubt, emphases on the importance of feelings, sympathy, and sensibility are central within all of the poems analysed. Indeed, the eighteenth-century campaign relied on this emotional component to enhance its political arguments. As Turley has argued, the element that differentiated the eighteenth-century abolitionist movement from previous campaigns was precisely the “*emotional* quality in the commitment of many individuals to the cause, a quality which contributed noticeably to the tone and texture of the internal life of the antislavery movement.”⁵⁴ Yet, while emotions served as a common method of political declaration, each female poet implemented feeling differently to convey her political aims, in turn strengthening literary diversity.

For example, similar depictions of emotional Africans are developed within the poetic pleas of Knipe, Yearsley, Williams, Robinson, Opie, and More, yet these women focus their discussions on various affected personas. Knipe focuses on the symbiotic relationship between emotion and physical strength within African female warriors to present a powerful woman. Knipe’s examination of the emotional connections of lovers within a tribe further enhance her sympathetic petitions. Yearsley extends this specific view of personal pain by describing a larger African family’s pain and suffering, particularly through the agony of females, in order to illicit sympathy within her readers. In Williams’s verse, a slave himself attempts to access his owner’s emotional side and spark sympathetic concern. Although the

⁵⁴ Turley, 87.

slave's attempts fail, his sorrowful bid to connect with his captor emotionally signifies the dire need for abolitionist petitions. To argue for emancipation, both Robinson and Opie give the feeling slaves themselves a voice. More, however, hesitates to show Africans as individuals, but opts simply to highlight their capacity for emotion as a reason to eliminate slavery and end human suffering. In any case, in their different constructions of sensibility, these women signify Africans as emotional human beings who suffer under slavery.

On the other hand, the Falconar sisters and Barbault focus on the emotional pain in England resulting from the implementation of slavery. Sympathy is of great social and political importance to Harriet Falconar who even beseeches royalty to gather support for abolition. Her sister Maria's conception of a battle of feelings focuses on the strong power of emotions to correct the damaging customs of slavery. Finally, Barbault, who perhaps wrote the most disparate poem of this group, favours a departure from excess emotion to improve cultural sensibility. Her argument for abolition focuses on Britons' emotional agitation under the commerce of slavery.

Furthermore, these discussions of emotion become intermingled with reason when these female writers deliberate the ills of trade and commerce. More, Yearsley, Williams, Barbault, and Opie all recognise the potential of feelings to influence personal convictions. Their belief in the power of emotions to sway public opinion is evident in their associations of feeling with commerce. More goes so far as to brand slave owners murderers who trade in souls. Her protégée Yearsley extends the insult further by daring a seller to offer his family to the trade. In Barbault's scathing depictions, commerce is a disease that can infect the heart, body, and mind. Opie's verse, intended for children, injects a lucid argument against sugar production with a more emotional plea for the liberation of slaves. Perhaps most interestingly, Williams

argues for an end to the trade by suggesting to the traders themselves that there is an alternative emotional value in philanthropy. Therefore, their varied representations of commerce each emphasise the vice and corruption that has overrun British economic concerns.

Their solutions to alleviating these social ills often allude to a focus on the “feminine.” As mentioned earlier, the sympathetic power of the people is often called upon to bolster support for abolition; females are portrayed as emotional, strong, and vital figures. Women are critical, in many respects, in the fight against slavery. These arguments, therefore, present evidence for a feminisation of the culture and accordingly speak of improving British society. In support of gender diversity and social improvement, the amalgamation of masculine and feminine is once again used to discuss societal change. For instance, Knipe’s African female warriors retain both masculine and feminine qualities. Without hesitation they fight for freedom for their tribe and show affection, compassion, and a respect for sensibility when paired with their mates. Zelma, the African heroine of Robinson’s verse, is also an emotionally and intellectually strong female figure. She defeats her owner’s aspirations to make her his mistress. In this instance, a woman’s determination prevails.

Alternatively, Williams, Maria Falconar, and Barbauld, focus on the strengths of feeling in Britain. Williams confidently allocates feminine qualities to leading male political figures to indicate the feminisation of British culture. She assigns femininity to male politicians with ease and success. In Maria Falconar’s imagined kingdom, emotions personified as female combatants triumph in establishing a humanitarian world. Finally, Barbauld’s contestation of commerce and corrupted empire entreats England to control rampant sexuality and restore respect to females by encouraging controlled femininity.

Moreover, it is quite possible to locate polemical and feminist sentiments in the consulted poems. As Clare Midgley writes, “[w]omen had...been instrumental in linking rival formulations of anti-slavery as a matter of rights or a matter of charity to contesting views of women’s social role as equals with the same rights as men or as possessors of innately feminine qualities with distinctive duties.”⁵⁵ Indeed, each woman’s desire to end slavery extended to an aspiration to improve British society. If these women writers hoped to abolish slavery and the slave trade, then they hoped to improve their own society, as well. Additionally, since they employed feeling, represented strong female figures, argued for manumission and human rights, desired political change, and challenged societal expectations and public opinion, then they were indeed promoters of what would today be considered feminist doctrine.

Social scientist Karen Sánchez-Eppler, in her work *Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism, and the Politics of the Body*, looks at the polemical fictions and poetry of antebellum America in the early nineteenth century to discover the development of feminist rhetoric. “Did the abolitionist movement,” she asks, “simply offer an education in political strategies and analysis to women who were already well aware of their inferior status?” Or, rather, “did the ‘protofeminist’ sensibilities of those female benevolence and reform organizations that predate the radical activities of abolitionist women provide a sufficient source for a feminist ideology?”⁵⁶ In other words, did women use abolitionism to voice prior feminist concerns or did abolitionism spark feminism?

Feminism is not an autonomous argument, and the complex issues which complicate feminism and abolitionism challenge the basis of Sanchez-Eppler’s

⁵⁵ Midgley, 40.

⁵⁶ Karen Sánchez-Eppler, *Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism, and the Politics of the Body* (London: University of California Press, 1993), 16–17.

simplistic query. Abolition cannot be reduced to a movement which sparked feminism, nor can it be considered merely a convenient political issue through which women expressed other social concerns. If the recognition of diversity in the period has taught us anything, it is to explore these controversial issues with a discerning, not inflexible, approach. As evidenced through detailed analyses of women's abolitionist verse, interrelations between the issues of feeling, community, and economy established this engaging area of women's literary participation as diverse political responses to social change in the British Romantic period.

Indeed, diversity—cultural, political, and literary—is most noteworthy in women's abolitionist verse. In earlier chapters, diversity was applied as a concept which strengthened women's calls for greater social acceptance. For example, in the literary and public spheres, women asserted diversity over difference to support intellectual community. In this chapter, similar aims are expressed within the construct of the abolitionist movement. Women poets petitioned for an abolitionist world by showing that racial difference is no excuse for society to uphold slavery. Through sympathy, they forged an emotional connection between the communities of African slaves and Britons. Consequently, by recognising social differences, yet locating a point of commonality, these women poets directly asserted an argument for cultural diversification. Also, their assorted poetic appeals to abolitionist sentiment show that while women poets were united in the movement and desired to strengthen literary influence, they still assured that their political beliefs and individual approaches were clear.

Numerous women poets participated in the campaign by versifying their bilateral desires to achieve full manumission for slaves and to ameliorate the turpitude of the British nation. This mixture, of course, meant that several white British

females situated themselves in relation to their black African counterparts. These connections show that women poets frequently perceived their stance within society to be abject. Therefore, their prescribed solutions for alleviating the base realities of slavery repeatedly ran parallel to declarations for the improvement of British society. Women poets advanced the view that cultural betterment could be fulfilled through not only complete abolition, but also through the realisation of women's potential as influential, valuable, and efficacious members of an advancing society.

CONCLUSION

In 1812, the *Quarterly Review* published the following critique of Anna Barbauld's poem "Eighteen Hundred and Eleven:"

Our old acquaintance Mrs. Barbauld turned satirist!...We had hoped, indeed, that the empire might have been saved without the intervention of a lady-author...Not such, however, is her opinion; an irresistible impulse of public duty—a confident sense of commanding talents—have induced her to dash down her shagreen spectacles and her knitting needles, and to sally forth...¹

This review, with its flippant remark regarding a woman's domestic duties, tells more of the prejudice of the reviewers and their regard for women writers than it does of the quality of Barbauld's extraordinary poem. Barbauld's powerful response to the economic, political, and social crises resulting from the war with France satirically examines the decline of the society, yet explores the idea of why the nation needs women. Barbauld aligns the sexual with the political, gender with the economy, and women with the social interests of Britain. Within this work, women stand as a strong gauge of the future progress of British culture.

¹ *Quarterly Review* 7 (June 1812): 309.

Yet this reviewer slights Barbauld's feminist views for societal improvement by suggesting that her poem about the decline of Britain signifies her abandonment of domestic responsibility. Indeed, at the end of a decade when many writers were still versifying on domesticity, Barbauld's piece stands out as a progressive, liberal, and feminist work which attests to Britain's growing and changing social responsibility. Throughout this dissertation, I have endeavoured to highlight the ways in which women poets of the Romantic period communicated their views about the social climate of Britain and their standing within the literary culture. Their employment of sensibility, community, and diversity to express the need for social change, the power of women, and the progress of the nation are striking examples of the beginnings of what could be considered feminist ideology.

Women poets' contributions to British Romanticism are indeed important markers of feminism. The women writers examined within this dissertation exhibited polemical ideas through their bold poems which championed diversity and the feminine. As a literary critic, I have chosen to highlight women's poetic responses to social shifts rather than focus on their early contributions to modern feminism which would have followed a more sociological tradition. It is still challenging to apply the term "feminist" to eighteenth-century women writers although their works frequently exhibited influential and polemical views of women.

Eliza Knipe's poem "Atomboka and Omaza; An African Story" is just such an example. Published in 1787, this work seems to be a strong precursor to Elizabeth Barrett Browning's abolitionist poem "Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point"(1848). This Victorian-era work, which communicates polemical views through the voice of an enslaved African woman, strikingly testifies to the increasing strength of feminist doctrine in the nineteenth century. Yet to refer to Knipe's eighteenth-century work as

“feminist” somehow seems troublesome when placed within discussions of Romantic poetry because of the notable scarcity of the term in the eighteenth century and previous scholars’ hesitations in applying it to Romanticism. The job for future critics is perhaps to demystify eighteenth-century feminism and find a way to discuss Romantic women’s poetry as examples of feminist literature.

A recent surge in feminist literary criticism has attempted to do just that by enhancing the Romantic canon by recovering many lesser-known female authors and highlighting women’s literary achievements. In 1979, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar published their groundbreaking study *The Madwoman in the Attic*, changing the tide of feminist criticism. Many critics would follow over the next few decades including Marilyn Butler, Barbara Caine, Elizabeth A. Fay, Moira Ferguson, Vivien Jones, Cora Kaplan, Anne Mellor, Barbara Taylor, and others. The latest scholar to participate in this trend is Norma Clarke. Her recent work, *The Rise and Fall of the Woman of Letters*, traces, in reverse, more than a century of literary history through the works of several female authors.² These literary critics have helped to chart the course of feminism as it relates to women writers.

I believe my dissertation, as an investigation of the specific topics of sensibility, community, and diversity, contributes to a better understanding of Romantic women’s poetry and feminism in the eighteenth-century. The final chapter, a case study using the distinctive issue of abolitionism as its focus, provides an indication of the ways these topics can be applied in other studies. It is hoped that my work has helped pave the way for future feminist critiques of women’s Romantic literature by elucidating the particular struggles of women poets, their strengths, and their triumphs.

² Norma Clarke, *The Rise and Fall of the Woman of Letters* (London: Pimlico, 2004).

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